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# I O N E

BY

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AUTHOR OF 'PATRICIA KEMBALL' 'THE ATONEMENT OF LEAM DUNDAS'  
'UNDER WHICH LORD?' 'MY LOVE' ETC.



*A NEW EDITION*

London

CHATTO & WINDUS, PICCADILLY

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MY DEAR MR SWINBURNE,

One of my earliest novels was dedicated to my beloved 'Father,' Walter Savage Landor. This, which must of necessity be among my latest, I dedicate to you, his faithful and loyal friend—as indeed you are the faithful and loyal friend of all to whom you have once given your trust and affection. I deeply feel the honour you do me in classing me among the number of those in whose sincerity you believe and whose friendship you return. Our original bond of union lies in the constant love and enduring thought we both have for our revered old Master; but we have others in our devotion to liberty, our belief in progress, our faith in humanity, and our want of fear. I am presumptuous in thus bracketing myself with you. You are one of the Captains of Thought, and I am only a humble foot soldier serving in the ranks. But just as captain and private follow the same banner and fight for the same good cause, so I dare to place myself by your side because of our common affection and our common aims. And you will forgive me that I thus link myself to immortality by coupling my name with yours.

Your sincere friend,

E. LYNN LINTON.

November 1883.





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# I O N E.

## CHAPTER I.

### THE NEW DOCTOR.

OAKHURST had only one fault to find with its new doctor:—he was too handsome. It was barely decent, as Miss Wintergreen said with that upward jerk of her head which went for so much. But Miss Maria Crosby simpered a little consciously, as one who knew, and said she did not quite agree with her dear Jane Wintergreen. And if she, a confirmed invalid and, in a manner, part owner of the local doctor, did not object to the young man's good looks, she was sure no one else need. Especially need not her dear Jane, who had never had a day's illness in her life, and who made it her boast that no medical man in England had ever been the richer by a pound of her money.

Miss Rachel Major, Maria's thirty-year-old niece and nurse, followed the lead of their friend Jane Wintergreen, and agreed with her that this new-comer, this Dr. St. Claire, was certainly too handsome for his work and the place. It was inconvenient; if no worse. It would have been better to have had some one more like that poor dear Dr. Brown who was dead and gone—some good respectable father of a family without romance or a waist, and as destitute of elegance as a twopenny pipkin. But this young Dr. St. Claire—'Armine St. Claire; what a name for the parish doctor of a dull country town like this mopy old Oakhurst!' put in Rachel, parenthetically—was more like an artist, or a poet, or a disguised prince in a play, than a useful, hard-working apothecary:—which was all they wanted here. And she must say, for her own part, knowing what people were, she was sorry.

And when she said this she glanced with gentle malevolence at her aunt Maria, the invalid.

Maria pulled her lace ruffles well over her hands, smoothed the bright rose-coloured coverlet of her couch, and made a feint to put

back her feathery ringlets with the tips of her taper fingers, in the elegant way for which she was famous.

‘To hear you talk, Rachel, one would think that good looks were a crime!’ she said with a shrill little laugh.

‘They are often a snare, aunt Maria,’ said Rachel demurely.

‘A snare I fancy most people would rather have than not, and only those despise who have not got,’ said aunt Maria, as demurely.

‘As none of us three can boast of good looks, we need not discuss that part of the business,’ said Jane Wintergreen sharply.

Jane stood as the embodiment of common sense in Oakhurst; as the embodiment also of that kind of honesty which does not shrink from saying disagreeable things, and which has about as much tenderness of touch as a file or a saw. And she never lost an opportunity for giving her dear friend Maria a scrape when she could.

‘Who said we were speaking of ourselves, Jane?’ said Miss Maria, with plaintive deprecation. ‘I am sure I am not! I know that I am a horrid fright now; but if I am, Rachel is no better, though she is a few years younger. People follow their childhood, and we go on as we have begun. And I may say this, that when I was a child I was as fair as a lily; for I have heard my poor mamma say so twenty times. I was quite a little angel, she used to say, and people would stop me in the streets to kiss me. But Rachel favoured her father, not us, and was always a little black thing—just like a little monkey. I remember when you could put her in a quart-pot, and she was the colour of a coffee-berry. And she has not changed since she grew up. She cannot wear light-blue or rose-pink for the life of her; and those are my colours now, as they have always been. I can wear nothing that becomes me half so well; but Rachel has to put up with purple and dark navy-blue, if she wants to be any way decent.’

‘Rachel is well enough,’ said Jane Wintergreen tartly. ‘If she has no complexion to speak of, she has a handsome nose and a good hand and foot; and I once heard our late rector say that a woman with a handsome nose and a good hand and foot had not far to go for a husband. And I am not so sure but that he meant Rachel Major; only his sister was in the way and would not have it.’

‘At all events, Rachel has not gone far enough for her husband, for all her hand and foot,’ said Miss Maria, with a little laugh.

‘I had a hand once, but I have spoiled it now. Rubbing for hours every day takes all the shape out of a hand,’ said Rachel, with reproachful stoicism.

‘Better spoil your hand, Rachel, by doing your duty, than harden your heart by leaving it undone,’ said aunt Maria.

‘Don’t I say so, aunt? and don’t I do as I say?’ retorted Rachel.

‘Let me look at your hand, Rachel,’ said Jane Wintergreen. ‘Mercy me! how can you call it spoiled? I never saw such a girl



as you are for running yourself down! You are very nice, I'm sure, if only you would think so.'

'I have been brought up to run myself down, and to hear others run me down as well,' said Rachel, beginning to cry. 'Aunt Maria had a complexion and I had not; and neither she nor my poor mamma thought anything of me because I was small and dark. And as for my poor grandmamma, she used to declare that my poor papa must have been a Hottentot once on a time. And I could not help being ugly. No one would be ugly if they could help it,' she added with undeniable reason and a fresh supply of tears.

'Now, Rachel, you have cried—and it all began about this young Dr. St. Claire,' said Maria, solemnly. 'And it is a bad omen. I have seen it all my life—begin a thing with a cry and it ends with a cry. And you do not think of my poor nerves, and how all these scenes try me. No one ever does think of me and my nerves!' she added petulantly.

'Maria Crosby! how ever can you say such a thing?' cried Jane Wintergreen. 'You, of all people, have no right to say that you are not considered. Who is, if you are not? My word, what next! Rachel is just given up to you; and you are made more fuss with than enough! It is flat ingratitude to say you are not thought of; and so now! And you need not make yourself ill by crying. You want the truth spoken to you sometimes, Maria, as we all do; and you shall have it from me, I promise you!'

'You are very cruel to me—you always were, Jane,' Maria exclaimed with hysterical excitement. 'You are all jealous of me because I am a favourite in the place—that is just where it is. No, Rachel, you need not!—don't touch me!' she said angrily, while still sobbing, as her niece, having finished her own crying, went up to the couch penitent and wistful, according to her wont when her aunt 'gave way' and 'was upset.' 'You know in your heart that you wish me dead and gone, and then you would be free to do as you liked. You know it, and I know it too. Poor me! In ill-health, confined to my couch, and my own niece wishing me dead!—oh, dear me! oh, dear me! what will become of me?'

On which her hysterical tears culminated in hysterical screams, and it took a great deal of soothing and hot brandy and water, made strong and sweet, before she would consent to come round again. But Jane Wintergreen, who had suggested cold water thrown into her face, and her hands well slapped for counter-irritation, was angry with Rachel for administering a remedy which she began to suspect Maria was almost too ready to receive.

The invalid led her niece a hard life; and of all in Oakhurst and the neighbourhood, Rachel Major was the one most to be pitied. It was a restricted and uninteresting kind of existence for every one; but hers was the most restricted and the most

uninteresting. And as Rachel knew that the malady to which her youth and all its natural liberties and enjoyments were sacrificed was, the one part vanity and the other self-indulgence, she felt the slavery that resulted doubly hard to bear. No doctor could precisely make out Miss Maria Crosby's disease. Some said that it was the spine and some that it was the heart; one specialist fell foul of the mucous membrane and the other made his camel of the sympathetic nerve. But all left her as they found her—lying on her invalid couch, kept up by beef-tea, strong jellies and much brandy; and unable, so she said, to put her feet to the ground. Had she tried, she would have found that she had as serviceable muscles as the rest, and that she might have been as well as she would. Wisely for herself, looking at things from her point of view, she decided that she would not. She knew her distinction to lie in her invalid couch, her dainty work, her pretty flowers, her cages full of birds, her pensive smile, her waxen skin, her low, sweet, studied voice, and the saintly patience with which she bore her mysterious malady. If she were to get up and go about like other people, what would she be? Just an old maid with a limited income and no claims to consideration—a faded beauty whose star had set—one of the herd of feminine failures—no more. Now she was a personage—the invalid par excellence of the little town—a creature exempt from duty and entitled to privileges—a kind of votive shrine, where those who ministered by way of flowers, sweet cakes, and frequent visits to 'that poor Maria Crosby,' deserved well of Heaven, and brought peace to their own consciences.

Wherefore she held by her rôle, and for the last ten years had been the soft-spoken and delicately-cared-for Moloch who had passed her young niece Rachel through the fire as her victim; who had also made her medical attendant the object of her adoration—not always discreetly tendered. So that Rachel was justified, if, seeing what had been said and done in the very dry tree of old Dr. Brown and his like, she feared an increase of folly in the green and flowery growth of the young and handsome Armine St. Claire.

Others besides Jane Wintergreen and Rachel Major thought the new-comer both too young and too handsome for the place. Mrs. Barrington—old Mrs. Barrington as she was called—who lived with her daughter Monica in the Dower House, about a mile out of Oakhurst, she too said it was a pity that Dr. Brown's successor should be so young and good-looking, and that she should feel quite uncomfortable if she had to speak to him, and scarcely confident of his skill. Though, what a man's professional skill has to do with a pair of large soft eyes, a mass of blue-black curling hair, a skin as white as ivory and as smooth as silk, a dainty little moustache, and hands and feet no larger than a woman's, it would be difficult to say. Still, beauty and brains are not generally

supposed to go together; and the prejudice, though unjust, is popular.

Monica, who seldom thought at cross-corners with her mother, quite agreed with her on this; and said, in her soft, sweet way: Yes, it was a great pity that the new man was so young, and she hoped indeed they should not want him at the Dower House. It would be too embarrassing to have to speak to him.

As for Anthony Barrington, the son and brother who lived at the Manor, he, as autocrat of the Oakhurst world, almost took it on himself to shoulder the law as his own private club, and turn the new doctor '*vi et armis*' out of the place. But his wife put up her airy buckler and protected the handsome St. Claire, as she had protected some others before now. She ruled her husband as pretty women with nice little ways, lively manners, a sharp kind of wit, and neither heart nor conscience to speak of, often do rule men whose gravity trenches on moroseness, and whose pride is only equalled by their spirit of domination. She ruled him without showing the shadow of her sceptre, and while leaving him the belief that he was absolute and supreme. She ruled him in the way best expressed by 'twisting him round her little finger'—that is, by making him soft by her caresses and pliant by her playfulness, then clinching all at the right moment by pretty alluring little pouts, mingled with the frank impertinence and amusing wilfulness of a vivacious and rather self-willed child.

'You dear old thing!' she said with a laugh, lifting up her arched eyebrows with as much fun as astonishment when Anthony had thundered against the new-comer. 'What can it signify to any one whether a doctor is a fright or an Adonis? You might as well find fault with a good-looking grave-digger. They are brothers, you know.'

'Theo! what an absurd child you are!' said Anthony, pretending displeasure and inwardly diverted.

'Well, so they are,' said Theo, quite seriously. 'And you might as well say that the poor dear ghosts should have a nice grave respectable old sexton to potter about them, as that a doctor ought to be old and ugly. What can it signify? Who cares for a doctor?' with a contemptuous little accent and a saucy toss of her small head.

'Doctors are men,' said Anthony, rather slowly.

'Oh no, they are not!' said Theodosia; 'they are prescriptions. Men! my goodness, no! they are only medicine spoons! And I am sure it does not signify whether one's medicine spoon is pretty to look at or hideous. It is horrid, whichever it is.'

'Well, perhaps you are right, Theo,' said Anthony.

'Perhaps? I am!' was her reply. 'And if I were you, Anthony, I would not pay this new man, this Dr. St. Claire, such a compliment as to object to him because he is young and hand-

some. After all, he is not so very good-looking—not like my handsome old Bear! And even if he were, what on earth would it signify?’

‘Nothing,’ said Anthony.

And from this moment the Master of the Manor changed front and agreed with Theodosia that it was foolish for people to make such a fuss about the young man’s good looks. He was only a doctor as she said, and what could it possibly signify to any human being if a mere doctor were handsome or the reverse? Besides, it was only English to let him have a fair trial, and to take the trouble of opposing him was both to pay him too great a compliment and to do themselves injustice.

What Anthony Barrington passed, his friend and territorial neighbour, Edward Formby of Hillside, was sure to back; throwing such weight as came from his broad acres and the unrooted possibilities of his bachelorhood into the same scale as that in which Anthony had thrown his broad acres and the settled influence of his married state. Hence, young Dr. St. Claire was allowed to settle peaceably at Oakhurst, and to show of what stuff he was made, unhindered by malevolence or opposition; and the unfriendly stir which had been made in the waters on his first appearance, after a time ran itself clear, depositing its ugly sediment by the way.

He proved to be made of very fair stuff indeed. Even Anthony himself, Brahmin of the Brahmins as he was, even he was forced to admit that the young man knew how to behave and was not such a puppy as he looked. He said this one day at the Town Hall, where the local magistracy assembled on Saturdays to apportion justice to the evil-doers, though they sometimes forgot to award equity to the oppressed. And he said it with Anthony Barrington’s well-known manner of patronage, which was vastly more offensive than his disfavour. It was a manner which asserted his own superiority by the contemptuous kind of generosity with which he spoke of his inferiors. It was tossing a few crumbs to deserving dogs while keeping the loaf as his own rightful share.

Edward Formby, both more good-natured and less careful of local proprieties than his friend, went a step beyond, and translated Anthony’s comparative permission into positive acceptance; and, thus marshalled, the rank and file pressed forward altogether. Jane Wintergreen was the only one who stood out against the general verdict; but then Jane Wintergreen was notorious for narrowness and bitterness, so that her prejudices were harmless because they were universal.

All the women, save herself and perhaps Rachel Major, were confessedly on the handsome young doctor’s side. He was the kind of man whom women love and of whom men are contemp-



tuous and jealous in one:—‘The kind of thing that fools admire,’ said Jane Wintergreen with a jerk.

To which Anthony Barrington reply coldly, lifting his thin lips on one side and showing his long eye-tooth: ‘Think so? I pity their tastes!’

Dr. St. Claire was young, slight, a little delicate in health, and very affectionate in temper. He adored women, loved children, and delighted in dogs—but he liked the smaller kind better than the bigger. He was full of graceful accomplishments and small helpful capacities; naturally handy; evidently domestic; extremely obliging. He was ready to do anything that he was asked and he could do everything that was required. He could tune a piano; humour a sewing machine; make boats and fans and caps and puzzles for the children out of old newspapers; play chess with refined ladies who prided themselves on their gambits, and whist with short-tempered men inexorable as to the call, and the need of getting out trumps with a long suit to bring in. He was a capital tennis-player and a patient listener to dull stories; he had a pure tender voice, and he sang pretty little French romances to perfection. Of this last accomplishment, however, he was exceedingly chary. As he was in deep mourning, it was perhaps natural that he should not do much in the way of light little songs; and his disinclination to sing these graceful trifles, of which the whole value lies in the method, to people who understood neither their art nor their meaning, passed as respect for his unknown but manifestly heavy loss.

Charming all through, his manners were perhaps his strongest point. Though not a flatterer, he was more courteous, more attentive in minor matters, more graceful in speech and more quick to understand half-tones, than is the average Englishman; and he had a way of idealising characters which left a very rounded and statuesque impression on the mind. He acted on the theory, which with him was a principle, that every woman thinks herself misunderstood, and that if you wish to please the sex all round, you must throw your plummet into unfathomed depths and stock all ponds with gold and silver fish. It was both the safest and the pleasantest plan, and kept him in the sunshine on high levels, out of the way of whirlwinds and waterspouts.

His suspected delicacy of health, his isolation and his sweet ways, appealed to the maternal instinct of Oakhurst with wonderful strength. Even young girls felt that he was something precious to whom it would be lovely to minister; while middle-aged women, both married and single, professed to feel for him as for a son; and the popular feminine phrase with which discussions were for the most part ended was: ‘And he is so pure!’

Certainly he was notably circumspect in his conduct, so that he was trusted as if he had been an older man—and perhaps with more reason.



For all this, he was out of place as a country doctor, making his living by such a practice as that of Oakhurst. He looked as if he had been born for courts rather than to go across moors on windy winter nights to see some old farmer who had made himself ill by a prolonged drinking-bout—as if it were his right to spend the balmy summer evenings in some jasmine-covered bower at the feet of fair patricians graciously accepting his homage, rather than by the bedside of some silly milliner who had lowered her system by tight-lacing and inordinate tea. Still, here he was and here he must remain—failing that problematical turn in the wheel which should give him an income without a capital, or a lucrative post in the official world without apprenticeship or patronage.

He had now been a year at Oakhurst, and, all things considered, his flag flew under a shining sky and his sails were set to a fair wind. The Anthony Barringtons had asked him to the Manor when they had had one of their second-set duty dinners; and old Mrs. Barrington had invited him to afternoon tea with the curate, the local lawyer, and the Oakhurst organist. Edward Formby had had him at a really well-conditioned luncheon, where the other men invited had certainly stared when the new guest was announced, but where he had held his own with so much tact and judgment as to sink his profession and float his personality before the meal was half over; and all the smaller people—especially those with marriageable daughters—had vied one with the other which should show him most favour. He had been married by common report to every girl in the place; and every girl in the place had wished that common report were true. But he had never hinted what could be construed into preference, not to speak of love, and he seemed to have an almost supernatural ‘flair’ for man-traps. He did his duty and attended to all alike with professional punctuality and personal impartiality; and he was not to blame if each young lady thought those handsome eyes of his meant more than he said, or that his fingers, when he felt her pulse, pressed her wrist with peculiar emphasis. In each case the wish was father to the thought, and the child was none of his.

It was odd, how often the girlhood of Oakhurst was ailing at this time. Hitherto, the place had been considered remarkably healthy; but now the elders were in better case than they had been in comfortable, gossipy, old Dr. Brown’s time, while most of the girls, who then never had a day’s ill-health, had now fallen into mysterious maladies which demanded a great deal of medical attendance. Many seemed threatened with consumption; a few had spells of low fever; all lost their gaiety, their appetite, their sleep; so that young Dr. St. Claire was fully occupied and somewhat exercised in his mind as to cause and treatment.

He had rather a difficult part to play; for more than one of

the parents in the 'second-set' resented his indifference, and thought he might do worse than ally himself to some respectable family who would help to make his standing sure, and who would give him the home he wanted. There was Flora Farley, the daughter of Captain Farley, now owner and once captain of a small vessel trading between Whitehaven and Hull—why would not she do? The eldest of six, and such a notable body as she was, she would save him more by her management than she would cost him for her keep. Or there was Madge Langhorne, the lawyer's daughter, and the youngest of nine—she was a real sunbeam in the house, and would make him such a pleasant companion in the winter evenings when his work was done and he came home to his own fireside! Or there was Rose Chesson, the one ewe lamb with no sister to divide nor interfere. Rose Chesson was the very thing. Her father, the retired cheesemonger, might be a trifle rough, and the mother was a little too fond of scarlet and gold, but Rose had had a good education, and with her piano and her pencil and her nice little sum in the Three per Cents., she might find a welcome to any man's home and heart. And what the deuce did the young fellow want that he should not be satisfied with what he could have? Were none of them good enough for him? Was he looking after Miss Barrington herself? or perhaps the Duke's daughter was not beyond him?

His persistent celibacy and cautious avoidance of all these patent man-traps, went near to injure the young doctor's popularity and curtail his fees in more households than one. But he held on his way, never heeding the broad hints here nor the cold shoulders there—a male Diana without ever a female Endymion in the unsuspected shadows of an undiscovered Latmos; and the maidenhood of Oakhurst got pale, had mysterious ailments, and took unpleasant draughts with secret weeping in vain.

One day young Mrs. Barrington took it on herself to touch openly the question which all were handling in secret. She was one of those irrepressible little women who put their busy white fingers into all the pies within range; and as there is a great deal of indolence, some cowardice and more good-nature in the world, she was allowed to stir to the depths what others were not suffered even to skim.

'Dr. St. Claire, you ought to marry,' she said suddenly, à propos of nothing. 'It is so much nicer when one's medical man is married.'

'I cannot afford to marry on Oakhurst practice,' answered Armine, lightly. 'I must wait until I am a fashionable physician in London.'

'There are many nice girls here who would make excellent wives; and the neighbourhood would like it better,' she returned, in that half-impertinent way of a great person talking to a little

one, ignoring all answers, reasonings, disclaimers, and pressing the original point as if nothing had been said to contravene it.

He lifted his eyebrows and shrugged his shoulders in his pretty un-English way.

'Mr. Barrington says so,' she persisted. 'He says that all medical men ought to marry. I do not know why, but that is what he says. He says that it is very much against you that you are a single man.'

St. Claire raised his eyes full into hers. What beautiful eyes they were!—far too beautiful for a man; too soft and darkly blue; with lashes too long and curling; with an expression too loving and pleading.

'I should be very glad to take your advice, Mrs. Barrington. I wish from my heart that I could!' he said emphatically. 'But what can a man do when the stars in their courses fight against him?'

He spoke with emphasis for the first part, with a certain subdued pathos for the second.

'I do not believe that the stars ever do fight in their courses against us. How can they?' answered Theodosia, with that queer literalness which those who liked her called naïve and quaint, and those who did not, silly and affected. 'I believe in a man's doing what he chooses to do.'

'Do you believe that he can overcome all obstacles by the simple power of his will? that in truth "*Vouloir c'est pouvoir*"?' asked Armine, with a sad little smile.

'Some things are impossible, of course,' she answered, as if arguing the question on its merits. 'We cannot fly up to the moon for instance; though Jules Verne says we can. But we can do a great deal when we like.'

'Just so,' he said, that sad little smile still about his lips. 'But when we want the moon, you see, we have to submit to necessity and go without.'

'But it is so silly to want the moon!' said Theodosia, gravely. 'Only babies do that. And I do not think you can call Miss Rose Chesson, or Miss Flora Farley, or Miss Madge Langhorne, or any other young lady in Oakhurst, the moon or stars either!' she added with a little laugh.

A flush came into his face, and his eyes gleamed with something that was not quite pleasure, as he seemed to straighten his back and lift his head with involuntary pride.

'I did not know that I was speaking of any of these young ladies—for whom, however, I have the greatest respect,' he said coldly.

'Oh! if you have some secret adoration, some grande passion in the past, I have no more to say,' she cried, looking at him with an arch smile.

'No! nor did I say this,' he answered, returning her smile with one as full of meaning, if not so arch.

As full of meaning—yes; but what did that smile mean? He looked right into her eyes as he spoke; right into her very soul, as it seemed to her. What did he want her to understand? What did he seek to discover?

'Then it must be the moon?' she said with a shrill little laugh, patently artificial.

'Perhaps it is,' he replied. 'If it is, I must, as you say, content myself with disappointment, and go without.'

Here the conversation dropped. But that sad sweet smile, and the way in which Dr. St. Claire had raised his beautiful eyes to hers, haunted young Mrs. Barrington for days after. Could he have meant her? It seemed madness to suppose it; but could he? Was she the moon unattainable for all his longing? was her previous marriage with Anthony the stars which had fought in their courses against him? She hoped not! Men are such unmanageable creatures at the best; but men who are not real gentlemen are worse than all! They are awful; and think nothing of making a scandal if the whim takes them. Indeed, they are rather proud, than not, to compromise those who are superior to them in station; and of course Dr. St. Claire was immeasurably her inferior; and it would be such a wicked thing if he were to think of her other than as a saint, a spirit, a fairy, a queen. It would be so foolish and so dangerous! She sincerely hoped not, she said to herself a dozen times a day; for if Anthony found it out, he would forbid St. Claire the house, and then Mamma—Anthony's mother—would blame her when she did not deserve it. For she was sure she had done nothing to encourage him—nothing! No, she would not think of it; it was so very wrong, so silly, and so useless. It was, indeed, like crying for the moon! And what folly that is!

Nevertheless, ever from that day, Theodosia Barrington, Anthony's pretty little feather-headed wife, cherished a certain secret kindness for Dr. Armine St. Claire which made her speak of him with interest, and often say, with a tender kind of compassion; 'Poor young man! After all, he is to be pitied!'

## CHAPTER II.

## AT THE DOWER HOUSE.

‘Poor young man! After all, he is to be pitied!’

They were discussing the young doctor at the Dower House. They often discussed him, both here and elsewhere. Beside his good looks and good manners, and the wonderful cures which were every now and then reported of him, there was an element of the unknown in his history which made him interesting and dramatic. He was not like one of themselves, born and bred in the place, of whom nothing unexpected could be discovered and by whom nothing unusual could be done. For all his year’s sojourn and good conduct, Dr. St. Claire was still essentially a ‘dark’ member of the community; and though no one knew anything to his disadvantage, no one could swear there was nothing to know, or stake so much as a fraction of credit on the assurance that the young man’s moral bill of health was clean all through. A tragedy in the past was by no means improbable; and English county families of assured respectability, whose social ledgers written on virgin parchment are public property to be read by all, regard a tragedy in a man’s history as cousin-german to a crime. A maniacal father, a murdered mother, even a brother hanged in war-time by mistake for a spy—such things as these throw a certain blight over the family-tree which touches the little twigs as well as the parent bole. And who could be quite sure that some such fatal blemish did not mar the perfect respectability of the St. Claire records? It was a possibility and a doubt; and the young doctor had the benefit, crosswise delivered.

Moved by this element of the unknown, Theodosia Barrington had always been fond of talking of him. She was fond of talking on all subjects, having that facility of speech which is like nothing so much as the incessant trickle of a leaking spout. And of late, having in remembrance those stars in their courses which had fought against his peace, and the yearning look in his eyes that had emphasized his sad little smile—believing that the handsome young doctor suffered from a secret wound of which she was the cause and of which she alone knew the existence—she spoke of him more than ever, and always with a curious undertone of tenderness breaking through her words, as if she had gathered him under the edges of her lace lappet for shelter and protection. So now, when sitting with her sister and mother-in-law, she said with a half-conscious little smile:

‘Poor young man! After all, he is to be pitied!’

‘Why is he to be pitied?’ asked Monica.



She was bending over her wood-work, but she straightened herself in her chair, and raised her soft, grey, dreamy eyes with frank astonishment in their look as she said again: 'Why, Theo?'

'He is so much better than his station—so much beyond his natural associates,' said Theodosia, rather primly.

'Yes, indeed,' chimed in Mrs. Barrington, for one of the rare times in her life agreeing with her daughter-in-law. 'He might almost be a real gentleman for manners and appearance. It is a pity that he should look so much like a man of family and fortune and so little like what he is. He is nothing now—neither a gentleman nor a merely professional man. It is really a great pity!'

'Is he not a gentleman, mother?' asked Monica.

She was once more bending over her wood-work; and this time she neither straightened herself nor looked up.

'Not what we mean by the word, my dear,' answered Mrs. Barrington, with the calm simplicity of confessed superiority. 'Not a gentleman like your brother or Edward Formby.'

Theodosia gave a short laugh.

'Well, no, not exactly!' she said, with a proud little toss of her small smooth head. Immediately after, she softened. 'Still, he is to be pitied,' she said in a compassionate voice; and this time Monica did not ask Why?

But Mrs. Barrington, looking at her daughter-in-law—'Anthony's wife,' as she generally called her—said in deprecation:

'I do not see why, Theodosia. On the contrary, I think he has got on here exceedingly well, and has done far better than might have been expected. Very few young men would have done so well, coming as he did without letters of introduction or personal patronage of any kind—as if he had dropped from the clouds. Why do you say he is to be pitied, my dear? You know that I disapprove of all false sentiment; and surely this is very false sentiment indeed!'

'We do not know all his private life; and he often looks very sad,' said Theodosia, in the same prim way as before. It was a way she had when she wanted to exasperate her husband's mother.

Again Monica looked up, with the same astonishment in her eyes as before, but she did not speak.

'You seem to have studied him very closely, my dear,' said Mrs. Barrington, with slight but evident displeasure.

'I am fond of watching people,' returned Theodosia, carelessly; 'and I have watched Dr. St. Claire sometimes. And I always fancy that he has had some great sorrow in his life. In fact, I am sure of it!'

'My dear!' remonstrated Mrs. Barrington, always slightly but certainly displeased.

'What kind of sorrow?' asked Monica, changing her tool.

'Perhaps he has loved above himself—loved hopelessly,

returned Theodosia, with a half-breathed and wholly compassionate sigh.

‘My dear Theodosia, what extraordinary ideas you have!’ again remonstrated Mrs. Barrington, this time almost angrily; certainly with a briskness of disfavour rare from her to all the world save Anthony’s wife, but by no means rare to her. ‘I should hope that Dr. St. Claire is far too well principled a young man to permit himself such a folly. What very remarkable fancies you have, my dear child! It is a pity you encourage them as you do.’

‘One cannot help one’s thoughts, mamma,’ said Theodosia sharply. ‘I always thought one’s mind at least was free! And I do not see the good of brains at all if one may not use them.’

‘Use them, yes; but in a proper manner,’ returned Mrs. Barrington.

‘Is thinking that a young man may have had an unfortunate love-affair, because he looks unhappy, such an improper manner?’ said Theodosia pertly. ‘I think it very natural!’

‘And I, on the contrary, think it a little indelicate in a young woman like you to indulge in such ideas at all,’ said Mrs. Barrington, coldly.

She was naturally a sweet-tempered and patient kind of woman, but nothing tried her so much as this want of solidity, this flightiness of Anthony’s wife, who was always pursuing some phantom or running away from some shadow. Now she was crazed with the dread of infection, when she insisted on the purification of the whole neighbourhood by such floods of carbolic acid that an Oakhurstian might be known half a mile off. Now she could not sleep at night for fear of burglars, when every door and window at the Manor had to be fitted up with pistols and alarm-bells, while savage dogs roamed loose about the premises at night, and frightened the labourers and house-servants nearly out of their senses in the morning. Now she took up the cause of the Continental poor, and advocated Communistic doctrines and peasant proprietorship for every county but her own; and now she violently patronised some local duck, who, she was determined, should prove a swan in the ugly stage, presently to manifest his inherited royalty by some grand flight heavenwards—which was like insisting that a fire-balloon was a star. Now it was art and now it was charity. ‘Mind’ was once her favourite hobby, and reading societies, essay societies, pen and pencil societies were its trappings; and then she grew tired of intellect and went into the most prosaic actuality—to learning how to cook potatoes and scour saucepans, how to clean grates and how to trim lamps. But nothing lasted long; so that she was really as fatiguing to consecutive people as if she had been a Will-o’-the-wisp dancing before them. And especially was she fatiguing to old Mrs. Barrington, who could not bear much mental unrest, and whose brain had long ceased to receive new impressions

and to travel along untrodden paths of thought. If she had had children, thought her mother-in-law, she would have been far wiser and steadier than she was now; and it was a thousand pities that she had had none. But though Mrs. Barrington said euphemistically that it was unfortunate, in her heart she held it as blameable; and her regret that Theodosia had not done her duty to the family and the estate by giving Anthony an heir, was undeniably as much resentment as sorrow. She thought her daughter-in-law as lightminded and unpractical here as in other things; and her childlessness was less a misfortune than a fault. Mrs. Barrington was not the only good woman who has fallen foul of nature as if it were a crime.

'Indelicate, mamma!' retorted Theodosia. 'If it is indelicate to fall in love, what was I when I married your son? and what were you and my own mother? How can it be indelicate when everybody does it?'

'See how well I am getting on with my frame, Theo,' said Monica in the sudden way of a person who, absorbed in her own pursuit, has heard nothing of the conversation eddying round her. 'I have almost finished it now. Is it not pretty?'

'No,' said Theodosia shortly. 'The acorns are too big and the leaves are too stiff.'

'Are they?' said Monica, holding the frame at a little distance and looking as if she thought her sister's criticism serious and worth consideration.

With no pretension to beauty nor genius in any supreme degree, Monica was a girl whom half the world called sweet and the other half clever. She had never been known to say an unkind thing nor to do a foolish one, and she was always ready to give help of a gentle and feminine kind to those who needed it. But she was not one of the active members of society, and she waited to be sought rather than went forward to seek. Since her father's death and their removal to the Dower House, two years ago, she and her mother had lived very retired lives, mainly devoted to graceful little industries, local charities, and each other. They let the busy world rush by them unheeded, and shared in none of its follies and but few of its pleasures. People said it was a pity that poor Miss Barrington did not go out more; and their compassion was genuine. To judge by appearances, however, it was a waste of force; for Monica seemed to be entirely content with life as she found it made for her by duty and her mother's will. And human nature having the beneficent power of falling into habits which satisfy by repetition, as well as revolting against those which pall by monotony, she had fallen into the habit of quiet domesticity and daughterly devotion, and wanted no more than what she had.

There was a curiously still and gentle atmosphere about

these ladies—a kind of moral perfume which reminded one of the faint sweet scent of dried rose-leaves. They had a subtle charm of which no one could precisely define the cause, yet of which all were conscious. It was not only in Mrs. Barrington's pale, pure, passionless face, which had once been beautiful and was still lovely in its own sad gentle way; not only in her smooth white hair, like a silver line beneath her widow's cap; nor in her gentle smile; nor yet in that air of sympathy matched with purity which made so many tell her their sorrows, but none their sins. It was not only in Monica's soft grey eyes full of that thought which is not born of observation; of those dreams which are unspoken desires; of those aspirations which are impossible as hopes and not sufficiently substantial to be regrets—those dreams, those aspirations that belong to women whose experience is limited and who imagine what they have neither seen nor felt—not even in the soft and melodious voice which each had alike, nor in the gentle courtesies which also each had alike. It was not only in their patent purity which libertines would have respected and saints would have honoured. It was not in one thing nor yet in another, but in all—like that perfume of dried rose-leaves mixed with aromatic herbs and odoriferous gums which diffused itself over the whole house—faint, delicate, subtle and uncatalogued, but interpenetrating and characteristic. Some called them ladylike, not knowing how else to qualify them; and some called them old-fashioned, where the epithet was for praise not reproach; some said they were 'so good,' which was a wide sweep, and some 'so quiet,' which was a narrow range, but all agreed that no fault could be found with them, save such as was contained in that regretful protest from the lively and energetic: 'It was a pity poor Miss Barrington did not go out more, and that her mother held her so close.'

Perhaps too, there was the faintest echo of dissatisfaction in the question which for the last three years people had been asking of each other: 'When was Miss Barrington going to marry?' She was twenty-three now, and at twenty-three a girl ought to be thinking of getting settled if she is to settle at all. It is not good to marry too early, according to English notions; but it was not wise to wait too long; and Monica had waited quite long enough.

She ought to make up her mind and take Mr. Edward Formby of Hillside. He was the husband manifestly designed for her by Providence. Age, station, rent-roll, the lay of the land and her brother Anthony's desire, were all in his favour, and they should influence her decision. The alliance had been arranged by the public, speaking as one man, ever since the birth of the little lady at the Manor had followed by seven years that of the heir of Hillside. But at twenty-three and thirty respectively, the two were still uncoupled; and people could not make out whose fault



it was, nor why. Anthony, who was twelve years older than his sister, had been married for the last nine; but, as has been said, his wife was childless, which made it all the more incumbent on Monica to continue the family and frustrate the hopes of a certain Major James Barrington of the Artillery, an obnoxious cousin now out in India with his battery. Being the heir, the Major was naturally looked on as a robber and an enemy; and, though a fine fellow enough to his family and friends, his future occupancy of the estates was regarded as one of the direst misfortunes that could befall Oakhurst, the Manor, or the Barringtons. Far better one of their immediate own, though only on the spindle side—far better a Formby-Barrington than an uncle's son born on the outside of the groove and brought up with a different shibboleth! But, in spite of all this strong lateral pressure, the thing had not come off as it should have done, and speculation exhausted itself in vain.

It must be confessed that Edward Formby, though by no means a cold man, was not a very ardent wooer. He liked Monica Barrington far away the best of all the girls he knew; and whenever he said, as he sometimes did, that he wished he had had a sister, he thought of her. But when he pictured the women for whom the world had gone mad—the Helens, the Aspasias, the Cleopatras of men's love—he did not give them a line nor a hue from her. He knew that he was designed by Providence and the fitness of things to take her to Hillside as his wife; but his state was one of philosophic waiting on the clearing of events and the ordering of days, rather than of active desire or eager endeavour; and, provided he married in reasonable time to have heirs so as to secure the family succession, he was contented to abide in patience, neither consumed with desire nor tormented by the delay.

So there the two stood, looking at each other across that narrow strip of silence which a hint from her or a word from him would have bridged over; while Anthony wondered and fumed at this long adjournment and Oakhurst speculated and antedated at its pleasure.

Pending the final arrangement of things, Edward Formby often went to London; perfected himself in billiards and in whist; bred a few horses for the turf, and ran as straight as he rode; drove a spanking team of chestnuts and the neatest drag in the country; was devoted to polo, pigeon-shooting, and pure breeds all round; was a keen sportsman and a lenient magistrate, as well as the most generous of all the guardians on the Board; was acknowledged to be a good judge of jockeys but a bad one of men; had a refined taste in wine and a catholic one in women; was a man of his hands in all ways, and the best-tempered and kindest-hearted gentleman in the district. Such as he was, with the figure of an athlete and the face of a faun, with his clever hands and his unstored head, his faults and his virtues, his worldly possessions



and his mental lack, he managed to exist and be glad in his own way, waiting for the dawn of that undesignated day when he should take Monica Barrington to Hillside as its mistress, and then and there sow with a sigh the last of those wild oats which men find it so pleasant to plant.

This, then, was how matters stood with respect to Monica and her marriage. Not formally betrothed, she was yet in a certain sense engaged; and not even for the Duke himself would her brother have allowed her to fling over Edward Formby, nor would her mother have consented to any other alliance. And though English girls are free to marry where they list when once the magic age of twenty-one has been reached, yet legal freedom does not always tear asunder domestic bonds, and parents and elder brothers have quite as much power as the Master of the Rolls or the Lord Chancellor. With Monica Barrington disobedience to her natural heads would have been as impossible as political rebellion to the Princess Beatrice.

Her mother was her life, the object of her deepest devotion, her daily care, her hourly thought and love. Anthony was in the place of her father—the appointed ruler of her destinies as head of the House whereof she was but a minor member. Between them both she had neither the wish for nor the possibility of freedom; and she did not regret what she did not desire. She made her own private world of dreams. For her outward life she ministered to her mother; for her inward, she lived in an ideal land where she wrote poetry and conquered the world's praise like Corinne—where she was now a heroine and now a saint—where she loved and was beloved by some beautiful being who had nothing of earth but its material restrictions—who was a man in form and a spirit in substance. Music and poetry, painting and lofty thought would be the speech of their love and the bond of their union. They would live where the sun ever shone, and the earth was ever green; where the starry night was as the silver lining to the golden robe of day; where the sun did not scorch nor the north-wind chill; and where, to sit hand in hand among the flowers, would be the consummation of their bliss.

This habit of dreaming made Monica in some sense indifferent to the facts of her daily life, always excepting her care for her mother. She created her own happiness, and reigned as queen in her own domain. No one could take her treasures from her. No one could destroy her gods, nor desolate her shrines, nor desecrate her holy places. She admitted no one into her confidence; and not even her mother guessed at the form of that veiled Isis to whom those long spells of silence were consecrated. When the snow fell and the bitter east-wind blew, Monica was safe in that island of Atalantis, where the blue sea lapped the shining sand, and the south breeze brought the scents of flowers and the far-off

songs of birds. When all Oakhurst was convulsed over some petty dispute in the vestry, some misunderstanding at the Board of Guardians and the like, Mrs. Barrington's daughter was mentally writing poetry that should stir the world, painting pictures that should elevate the race, making music that should realise the fable of Amphion and the might of Orpheus. What had she to do with the sordid world of prosaic fact, or what had it to do with her? Isolated on her pure heights she lived above and beyond her surroundings, and possessed her soul in peace. But her ideal life was rendering her unfit for practical existence; and she was running into dangers of which she knew neither the name nor the extent.

### CHAPTER III.

#### OVER THE WOOD-WORK.

WHILE Theodosia was appearing to criticise Monica's work with judgment, and Monica was appearing to think her words worthy of attention, the young doctor was seen driving up the sweep before rounding the angle to halt at the hall-door.

'Why, here is Dr. St. Claire!' said young Mrs. Barrington, with more than usual animation. 'Why has he come, mamma? Is any one ill?'

'Grace has a cough and a pain in her side,' was the elder lady's reply. 'I must see him before he goes, Monica,' she added, turning to her daughter. 'Ring the bell, my dear. They must not let him go before I see him.'

'I hope Grace is not really ill—she is such a good servant,' said Theodosia, with unwonted amiability.

'I did not think you had ever noticed her,' returned Mrs. Barrington, with a gratified smile.

The arrogance of her manner to servants, and the indifference of Anthony's wife to all the humane side of mistresshood, had always pained her mother-in-law; and Mrs. Barrington was glad to see what she took to be the sign of better things. To her, servants were beings of a lower race, destined by Divine wisdom to subordination and ignorance, incapable of right judgment or true morality unless led, or if need be coerced, by their betters—but coerced with as much gentleness as strictness—dominated for their own good and the glory of God in the setting forth of discipline. Simple in her own tastes, she looked on fashionable array in her female servants as both indecorous and sinful; and the man who should have smoked a cigar when in her service would have been warned for the first offence and discharged for the

second. She liked best those maids who could neither read nor write, and those men who abjured newspapers and knew nothing of politics. She translated the famous division of 'men, women, and the Harveys,' into 'men, women, and domestic servants;' but if they were ill she had them carefully nursed; if they were in sorrow she comforted them by telling them how good it was for them to suffer, and how great a sign of Divine favour was affliction; when they grew old she pensioned them; when they married she set them up in blankets, crockery and a copper kettle; she never scolded, even when displeased, and she rewarded them for well-doing liberally. For all that, this gentlewoman who reminded one of some faint and exquisite perfume, like dried rose-leaves still sweet even in their decay, thought the humanity of the lower class something different from her own, and looked on the endeavour to educate them as the beginning of social strife, the starting-point of revolution, and flying in the face of Providence in a wild and wilful way.

'Oh, I know that you think me a horrid hard-hearted little monster!' laughed Theodosia, gaily. 'But you see I am not so bad as you make out; and I have always liked poor Grace.'

'I am glad of it, my dear,' said Mrs. Barrington, kindly. 'And Grace is a good girl, poor thing, and does her work very creditably.'

'Yes, she is very nice,' said Theodosia; and Mrs. Barrington looked pleased.

All the same it was fortunate she did not put any leading questions. Had she done so, she would have found that Theodosia did not know whether the girl, whose efficient service she had commended, were the house-maid or the lady's-maid.

Presently Dr. St. Claire came into the room. With that easy grace of his which seemed to assert and claim absolute equality even with the proudest, he came up to where the three ladies were sitting, and offered his hand as if he had been Edward Formby himself. Mrs. Barrington would have liked it better if he had not. But when her sense of station and her sweetness of nature came into collision, the latter always won the day, and she was sure to forgive what she did not approve. People do not mean to do wrong, she argued. They sin chiefly from ignorance. And at the worst it is right to forgive.

'How do you find poor Grace?' she asked with kindly anxiety.

'She is very ill,' said Dr. St. Claire. 'She has double pneumonia, and her state is critical.'

Mrs. Barrington's mild face grew anxious.

'Poor thing!' she said passionately. 'I am indeed grieved to hear this; but I was afraid she was very ill.'

'I am so sorry! Poor Grace!' said Monica, looking up with her whole heart of compassion in her eyes.

'Is it catching?' asked Theodosia, her cheeks dyed crimson

for fear. 'Mamma!' she added excitedly; 'do be careful! do mind what you are about!'

'No, it is not infectious,' said Armine, reassuringly. 'I would not allow you to remain here if it were!'

'How nice of him to say that!' thought Anthony's wife, taking the pronoun to herself, and sending for acknowledgment a pretty half-grateful half-roguish look to the thoughtful and clever young doctor who took such especial care of her safety.

He, on his part, glanced at Monica, then fixed his eyes steadily on her mother. Young Mrs. Barrington had not been in his thoughts.

'I should urge her removal from the Dower House if there were risk to you in her remaining,' he continued. 'But you need have no fear. The illness is severe and will be long; but it is not dangerous to others. Only, she will require good nursing and great care.'

'My servants are always well looked after when they are ill,' said Mrs. Barrington, a trifle stiffly. 'Tell me what has to be done and your orders will be obeyed to the letter.'

He told her the usual routine of equable temperature, and the like, adding: 'I gave all these instructions upstairs, to the—house-keeper?—the person they called Mrs. James.'

'My maid. But I would rather go and see for myself personally,' answered Mrs. Barrington, rising.

She expected the young doctor to leave the room with her. Instead of which he simply went to the door, opened it for her to pass through, then came back to where Monica was sitting, still with her wood-work in her hand.

'This is pretty,' he said, taking it from her in the most natural way of equal comradeship imaginable; 'and well done. Would you like me to lend you some patterns, Miss Barrington? I have some good designs which have not been published and are therefore quite fresh. Shall I bring them up with me this evening when I come to see the servant?'

'Thank you, yes, I shall be glad to have some new patterns. I did not know that you carved,' said Monica, pleasantly smiling as she spoke.

'A little. I do a little of many things,' he answered, also smiling and speaking pleasantly.

'I am glad you carve, for then we can exchange our patterns. One gets so tired of things, looking at them so long before one begins to work on them! They seem to lose all their freshness and interest by being looked at,' said Monica.

'Do you soon get tired of things, Miss Barrington?' asked Dr. St. Claire.

He was looking intently at the acorns on the frame, and he spoke in the indifferent way of a man asking a half-foolish and



totally unimportant question. But his voice had a curious little tremor in it, and his breath came just a trifle checked and hard.

'I do of wood-work patterns, when I have them a long time before beginning to work on them,' said Monica, with simple literalness. 'But in general I do not soon tire of things.'

'Of people?' asked Armine, with the same strange undercurrent of emotion beneath an exterior as calm as if he were making a professional diagnosis.

'Of people, never!' she answered emphatically, thinking of her mother.

'No; there is a good reason for that,' said Theodosia, with her shrill laugh. 'As you care nothing for anybody, I do not see how you can get tired. You must have, Monica, before you can lose.'

St. Claire raised his eyes to Monica and as suddenly let them fall. Hers were turned on him in the fixed way of one whose mind is preoccupied. She was thinking of his question, and her answer, and now of Theodosia's commentary; she was not thinking of him personally. But when their eyes met, hers dropped as suddenly as his. Something seemed to have passed between them which made her abashed and him afraid—she abashed by what she saw, he afraid of what he felt and what he knew that she had seen. Fortunately at that moment young Mrs. Barrington was looking at herself in the hand-glass by which Monica judged the better of her work by reflection, and thus saw nothing of that look which had told so much. When she looked again at St. Claire there was nothing to see. The young doctor was a man of self-control and a quick recovery.

'Do you carve, Mrs. Barrington?' he asked in quite his usual manner—that manner which was so sweet and tender, so almost caressing in its tones and gestures.

'No. I do not care for making clumsy knobs or cutting little holes in bits of wood. It seems so silly!' Theo answered with a laugh. 'It is no better than that ridiculous open-work embroidery which ladies used to be mad about a few years ago—cutting holes in a piece of cambric and then sewing them up again! I think all that kind of thing so intensely stupid. I like lawn-tennis and billiards and quick riding so much better. I hate all missy things.'

And at this she laughed again, and looked at Monica as the point of her aim.

'It's a pity you do not carve; you would find it very interesting. And it is not difficult; in fact it is wonderfully easy in proportion to the results,' answered Armine, passing over the items of her disclaimer and going back on the central fact.

'Should I? As you recommend it so strongly, Dr. St. Claire, I think I will try it. Your advice is like a prescription,' she added with a naughty smile; 'a prescription which somehow one must obey.'



She meant to please the young man by this flattering attention to his wishes, poor fellow ! And when she had pleased him, what then ? Chi lo sa ? She was one of those women who put their foolish heads into bags and run among the quicksands, never looking to their feet.

‘Will you teach me, Monica ?’ she continued, looking at St. Claire as if she wished him to take up the offer.

‘Yes, with pleasure,’ answered Monica.

Armine said nothing.

‘And perhaps you will lend me some patterns, too ?’ continued Theodosia, turning to him. ‘I know all Monica’s by heart, and I am tired of them.’

‘Willingly,’ he answered, with his best air of a disguised prince.

And yet he would rather that she had not asked him, and that Monica had been the only one to profit by his store. He was a generous young fellow by nature, with a hand as open as if he counted his fortune by pounds where he reckoned it by pence. All the same, in this matter he felt mean and churlish, and wished that young Mrs. Barrington had not asked him for the loan of a few patterns of wood-carving.

‘And yet it is better,’ he said to himself.

But why should it be better ? How could there be two sides—a better or a worse—to such a simple thing ?

Soon after this Mrs. Barrington returned, and they had a little talk about the sick girl and her condition ; and when this was over, the doctor’s visit was also necessarily at an end, and he took his leave, as he ought to have done a quarter of an hour ago.

‘I will bring up the patterns this evening,’ he said as he was shaking hands with Monica.

If you speak while you are shaking hands, it seems only natural to hold the hand for as long as the speech lasts. There was nothing unseemly, then, in Dr. St. Claire’s holding Miss Barrington’s hand while he said this ; but Monica’s face, usually so colourless, flushed crimson ; yet she did not withdraw her hand. If her blush betokened vexation, would she not have done so ? he thought. He forgot that other explanation of a girl’s passivity—her reluctance to show that she has seen, felt, or understood.

‘Of what patterns was Dr. St. Claire speaking, my dear ?’ asked Mrs. Barrington, when he had gone.

Monica told her mother what, after all, was not much to tell—simply the loan of a few quasi-artistic designs.

‘Is not this rather a familiarity ?’ asked Mrs. Barrington, her feelings of caste breaking through her Christian kindness in the odd contradictory way characteristic of her. ‘Remember, my dear, though he is a very creditably conducted young man by all accounts, and, I believe, really skilful in his profession, he is not a gentleman,

and we know nothing of him. He must not be encouraged to forget his place and to act as if he were our equal.'

'I could scarcely refuse, dear mother, could I?' returned Monica. 'He made the offer very naturally and kindly. I think I could scarcely have refused it.'

Soul of honour as she was, she said nothing of the look which had made her cower down and had made him tremble. Looks are not evidence like words or deeds, and they are always liable to misinterpretation.

'Perhaps not, my dear,' answered Mrs. Barrington. 'You could not be rude at any time. But it was rather forward on his part, and I am sorry for it.'

Monica looked troubled. It was so seldom that her mother had to take a reproving tone where she was concerned, that she scarcely knew herself now when, if St. Claire were to blame for proposing this little interchange of friendly courtesies, she was also to blame for accepting it. Her face showed her trouble so plainly, that her mother's heart softened and her mild annoyance passed like the mist of a summer morning.

'I dare say I am a little too particular,' she said tenderly and with a reassuring smile. 'I am old-fashioned, you know! Of course he meant it kindly, poor young man; and we ought to take things as they are meant.'

'I was here all the time, and I saw nothing forward in it,' said Theodosia, rather sharply.

She was displeased that her mother-in-law should make so much of Monica's share in the matter. It overshadowed her own.

'No?' returned Mrs. Barrington. 'Then I dare say I am wrong.'

'And he is going to lend me some patterns as well; so it was not only Monica of whom he thought,' continued this young woman hardily.

'Yes?' said Mrs. Barrington. 'It is all right, I make no doubt my dear. But, if I were you, I would be a little careful how you encourage anything like an intimacy with the young man. I know my son, and I know his extreme particularity.'

'And I know my husband, mamma,' retorted Theodosia. 'Anthony is not such a goose as to object to such a little thing as this. We are not so many Grand Lamas and poor Dr. St. Claire a mere crossing-sweeper.'

'My dear Theodosia, it is really impossible to talk to you!' said Mrs. Barrington, with the irritability which her daughter-in-law alone, but she so often, aroused in her. 'You have allowed yourself to get into such a disastrous habit of exaggeration, it is really impossible to discuss anything with you on reasonable grounds! Grand Lamas! Crossing-sweepers! What a tone to take! It is not worthy of you, nor of me, Theodosia!'

'I wonder what you would do, mamma, if you had not me to find fault with!' said Theodosia. 'I declare I do not think you

see an inch of good in me from my head to my feet. Poor Anthony! how you must pity him!’

‘Theo, come and see the new kittens,’ said Monica, suddenly. ‘They are such dear little mites, and have such a nice bed in the library. Will you come? The mother looks just like the White Cat.’

‘Yes, and I will not come back here again, mamma,’ said Theodosia, rising. ‘So good-bye; and try to think a little less badly of me if you can—for Anthony’s sake, if not for my own. I know, of course, that I am nothing to you; but as Anthony’s mother, it would be more convenient if you thought his wife less of a monster than you do.’

‘I was not aware that I thought you a monster, Theodosia,’ said Mrs. Barrington, coldly.

‘Oh yes, you do, mamma! You think me a toad, or a frog, or something horrid, I know—perhaps a cockatrice!’ she added as her latest shaft, following Monica briskly out of the room.

‘My dear,’ said Mrs. Barrington, when Theodosia had gone and Monica had returned; ‘that poor girl becomes more and more intolerable every day of her life! I really sometimes fear that she is not quite right in her mind—she has such extraordinary crazes, now on one thing, and now on another.’

‘She is very volatile,’ said Monica, thinking it less rasping and more soothing to agree in part than to deny wholly.

‘Volatile! She is indeed that, and more,’ said her mother. If she is going to make herself as ridiculous by her patronage of this young man as she has of others, I do not know what we shall do nor what will happen. Indulgent as your brother is to her—‘weak’ she would have said had she spoken as she felt; as every woman would say of her male relation whose wife she does not like and whom he does not desert—‘indulgent and generous to a fault,’ she repeated, ‘I do not think he will approve of her taking up this young man, and making him her latest pet, as she did with James Solly’s son. It is really too distressing to see her so silly and thoughtless!’

‘I do not think she means to do wrong, but she is, as you say, dear mother, very thoughtless,’ returned Monica. ‘I do not think that you need worry yourself, however, about Dr. St. Claire,’ she added.

‘Why should I not, when I see such folly?’ returned her mother. ‘How can I help worrying myself?’

‘But he is too good and wise to be drawn into anything questionable,’ answered Monica. ‘And it would be very questionable if he allowed Theodosia to befriend him more than Anthony would like. In things of this kind husband and wife must go together,’ she added sagely.

‘As for that, your brother sees only with her eyes,’ returned Mrs. Barrington. ‘She can do what she likes with him. He

seems to be really—what shall I say?—besotted—under a spell—with respect to her.’

‘He certainly does love her very much,’ said Monica. ‘So I suppose she shows the best of herself to him. You see, mother, she must have a best to show.’

‘Well, there is no use in looking at things from the dark side only,’ said Mrs. Barrington, with a gentle kind of sigh, her irritation passed and her sweeter nature once more regnant. ‘She is very light-minded, and not the person I should have chosen for your dear brother’s wife had I been allowed a voice in the matter. But time works wonders, and I hope time will make her a little more wise and staid than she is now.’

‘Yes, I hope so too. She is very good-natured,’ said Monica.

‘And very foolish,’ returned her mother. ‘But she means no harm, I dare say.’

‘I am sure she does not,’ said Monica, sure of nothing of the kind, but glad to throw oil on all disturbed waters and to brood, dove-like, over all eggs of peace.

‘My good child!’ said Mrs. Barrington, fondly. ‘Always my sweet peace-maker! Ah, Monica, what should I do without you? The day when you leave me will be the saddest of my life—the day when you disappointed me would be my day of doom! I could never outlive a sorrow from you.’

‘You shall never have one, that I can help, mother,’ said her daughter, going over to her, and kissing her. ‘You are my first care and my only love. I live only for you—and shall to the end.’

## CHAPTER IV.

### THE PAST AND PRESENT.

MRS. BARRINGTON was right:—they knew very little about the young doctor who had settled among them. Though his manner was perfect, his skill unquestionable, and his year’s conduct blameless, yet these were his sole credentials. And British respectability in high places likes to have something more solid in the retrospect before it commits itself to the freemasonry of adoption and equality. Perhaps had it known all it would have given the sign and password to Armine; perhaps not. Social Brahminism is a capricious foster-mother, and nourishes one outlying member while it starves another with bewildering injustice.

There was not much chance, however, that it would be called on to exercise judgment in the case of St. Claire. For though he sometimes spoke of his father, more frequently of his mother, and

often of the time when he lived in France, he spoke only in general, and always changed the conversation when it drifted too near to details. Hence he gave no one the power of choosing between what had been in the past and what was in the present—nor of deciding whether they would receive him for the sake of the former or exclude him because of the latter. Oakhurst judged of him only by things as they were, and things as they had been did not enter into its calculations.

Yet its story, secret as he kept it, had nothing in it dishonouring to his name if much that was grievous to his feelings. Nevertheless it was scarcely one he cared to tell, and it was only natural that he should hide it with such care as of itself to cause suspicion.

The St. Claires had been rich men in England for the last three generations. The founder of the family in Perfidious Albion, M. le Marquis de Sainte Claire, a royalist exile of '92, had been for one while poor enough. Ultimately he married an heiress to whom he had given French lessons, whereby he made his own fortune, and, gentleman '*de la vieille roche*' as he was, did not mar hers. His son succeeded to the property; cultivated English sympathies; dropped both the Marquis and the De which his father had retained; called himself plain John Clare, Esq.; was proud of his maternal ancestry; and tried to forget that he had inherited French blood from his father. He was more '*John Bull*' than many who ethnologically are all Bull, and those stood best with him who complimented him with most unction on his thoroughly English characteristics, and the fine patriotism of his politics.

His son again, Armine's father, went back to the Gallic strain; took up his marquisate; liked nothing so well as to call himself French; and blasphemed the British intermixture in his veins as if it had been so much muddy water poured into wine. He repudiated all connection with that unpatriotic Clare; married a Parisienne *pur sang* and went in for the right thing and philological exactness. He was the Marquis de Sainte Claire; and he was fond of saying with a broad British accent: '*Nous autres,*' and '*Nous Français.*' He had no pride in his position as an English landowner, but coveted that estate at Tours which had been his forefathers' in the days before the assembling of the States General. When therefore the railroad was taken through an outlying portion of his property, he sold the whole thing out of hand, and went off to Tours, as a Mohammedan might have gone to Mecca. Here his wife died, and the star of his prosperity set.

At this time young Armine was about sixteen, as beautiful and tender as the Apollo Sauroctonos. His mother's death nearly broke his heart, and did slightly disturb his father's brain. The poor widower tried to overcome his sorrow by excitement, and took to gambling on the Bourse according to the prevailing madness of the time. Eager and extreme as he was by nature he followed the



crowd with a swift step and an unsteady head. At first he did well. The demon who watches over gamblers baited his hook with a florid fly, and at one moment the Marquis de Sainte Claire had doubled, and at another trebled, his original capital. But he played the game too long and followed the fly too far. He drifted on to the rapids; and then he shot Niagara. One morning he woke to find himself in the boiling surf below, hopelessly ruined. Out of the wreck of his fortune he managed to save just enough to start his son in a profession and provide himself with a decent funeral.

The fancy of the lad, at a time when costly fancies were the legitimate outfalls of his wealth, had gone to science and the microscope. For all his beauty he had some sterling stuff beneath his clustering curls; and for all his manner and what would seem to be his natural rôle of carpet-knight and lady-killer, he had aspirations and ideals like men of fewer temptations. He was in the phase of humanitarianism and the worship of science when this ruin came upon him. When he realised the fact that he had to till his own field and work his own mine, he turned what had been an intellectual pleasure to practical account, and entered himself as a student of medicine in Paris and afterwards in London.

When his last examination was passed and his hand was ready for the plough, the money saved from the wreck had run out and his father's work was done. One morning the poor ruined Marquis was found lying peacefully asleep in his narrow bed—that sleep which knows no waking. A small bottle of cyanide of potassium was lying empty on the floor, and the manner of that sudden death—the reason of the froth hanging about those pale lips—was too patent to be denied.

This then was the reason why Armine spoke so seldom of his past and gave so few particulars of his family. Pecuniary ruin and paternal suicide are not pleasant supporters for a coat-of-arms; and between sacredness and sorrow he felt that reticence was better than confidence. He had nothing to hide if need be that he should confess; but also he had much that he did not wish to disclose voluntarily and unnecessarily. Hence he held his peace and kept his family history like a book closely sealed from prying eyes; and the world speculated on the secret writing in vain.

It was not long after his father's death that St. Claire, who had come over to England, heard of this modest practice at Oakhurst, which had become vacant by the death of Dr. Brown. He went down; paid a small sum for fixtures, goodwill and lease; took up his quarters in the deceased doctor's house; added his own door-plate; re-papered the surgery; laid in a stock of new instruments; and stepped into the lapsed practice like so much inherited plate and linen. Miss Maria Crosby, the paupers, the 'second set,' and the servants at the grand houses, all fell into his hands; and there was no one to oppose him. The only word said in his disfavour

was that he was too young and too handsome for the requirements of the place. As time went on, these two objections fell by familiarity into the background, and then the pegs of dissatisfaction were to be found in these questions: Who is he? Where does he come from? What is his family and what are his antecedents? Why does he never tell us anything about himself? Why has he no visible friends nor relations in England? Why is he so sad and reserved? And, how does he, a mere country doctor as he is, without private fortune, manage to be so like a young prince in disguise and to have all those accomplishments which only rich men can give their sons?

His history, had it been known, would have answered all these questions. The luxurious education of his well-found youth had made him the accomplished gentleman he was. His mother's untimely death, his loss of fortune, his father's tragic end, had thrown that air of melancholy about him which so strangely moved the world of women, besides making him discreet and reserved as to all the rest. He could not speak of his past, partly because he would not run the risk of looking like a snob by boasting of his former vanished grandeur; partly because he did not choose to set the social sleuth-hounds on his trail. But neither would he be drawn into close friendships with people on a par with his present, but below the line of his former, place. If he might not dwell on his own inherited level he would not build below it. Hence, among other disagreeables he was the veritable flying-fish of the community—not accepted as an equal by his natural peers and not choosing to make himself the comrade of his present equals. It was an unpleasant position; but he could not improve it. But though he was not a strong man he was both reasonable and sweet-tempered. And these make a moral amalgam as serviceable in its own way as that more fibrous quality known as force of character.

Grace at the Dower House continued seriously ill. Double pneumonia is not a trifling ailment anywhere, but when it comes during the harsh spring winds of England, the risk to life is naturally increased, and the necessity for constant medical attendance more and more urgent. It was in the received order of things, then, that young Dr. St. Claire should go every day, and in the beginning twice a day, to the Dower House; and that when he went, he should see Mrs. Barrington in the drawing-room to make a more accurate report than even the trained nurse could do. This was his duty as also her desire; and had it been even against his own wishes he would have been bound to fulfil the one and gratify the other. As things were, it was not against his wishes; and in this manner at least his duty ran curriole with his pleasure.

He was thus thrown much with Monica in these later times; and if Mrs. Barrington never forgot that this well-bred, pleasing, handsome young man was only the country doctor, her daughter

sometimes did, and Armine himself, always. He had established a community of pursuits and tastes between Monica and himself which had both its charm and danger. He not only lent her designs for her wood-carving—often made by himself—and gave her a few extra dodges, as he called his deft manipulation of tools, but he also brought up his favourite books—for the most part poems with passages vigorously under-scored, and cognate passages in other poets jotted down in the margin like Variorum readings. As he always acted openly and straightforwardly, and offered his loans, while he discussed their merits, in Mrs. Barrington's presence, that gentle woman, whose creed of caste was so diametrically opposed to her daily practice and Christian philosophy, never found the time nor occasion when to interfere or deny. It would have been too ill-bred to have refused these little attentions; which, after all, she thought, meant nothing so much as the young man's own intellectual relief. It must be very dull for him at Oakhurst, as she said more than once to Monica. Among his own class who could possibly be a congenial companion for him, so highly educated as he was, and with so much native refinement as to make him almost like a real gentleman! It must therefore be pleasant to him to talk on the subjects which interested him to people like themselves, who could understand him; and it was only right to help young men to keep themselves select and out of low company. It all showed a very nice taste in him; and as it committed themselves to nothing doubtful she was not sorry to lend that helping hand to masculine virtue which good women think they give to young men, when, at five o'clock, they hand them cups of tepid tea and nice little slices of thin brown bread and butter.

'It gives him something to look forward to, poor young man,' dear Mrs. Barrington used to say with gentle benevolence, making a kind of self-excuse for a practical democracy not naturally in her line.

'Yes,' said Monica.

'And keeps him out of low company,' said Mrs. Barrington.

'Yes,' answered Monica again.

'So many country doctors take to drinking habits, it is only right to do what one can to save this poor young man from such a fate!'

'Yes,' said Monica, again; this time with a certain hesitation and a sudden feeling of revulsion.

In her heart she thought it not very likely that Armine St. Claire would fall into drinking habits or take to low company with or without their five o'clock cups of tea. But she did not say so. She had an idea that it was the best policy not to make herself too decidedly the young man's champion.

'What books did he bring you this morning, my dear?' Mrs. Barrington went on to ask.

Monica laid her long white hand on two books beside her.

‘One of Matthew Arnold’s, and one of De Musset’s,’ she replied.

‘And you lent him—?’

‘Adelaide Proctor and Jean Ingelow.’

‘These are sweet and harmless, being written by women,’ said Mrs. Barrington. ‘I am not so sure of his choice. French literature is always doubtful—and who was this De Musset?’

‘I have not read him yet,’ answered Monica. ‘But I believe he is beautiful.’

‘He may be dangerous all the same, my dear,’ said the mother anxiously. ‘And I have forgotten all my French, so that I cannot read and judge for myself. You must be careful, Monica.’

‘Yes, mother, I will.’

‘And if you come upon anything doubtful, you must put away the book at once.’

‘Yes, mother. But I do not think Dr. St. Claire would lend me anything in the least degree doubtful,’ she added very gently.

‘He knows too much of French literature, my dear, for my taste,’ said Mrs. Barrington, with an air of conviction. ‘We all know how hopelessly corrupt it is.’

Her daughter said no more. She always knew when to give in so that a discussion should not broaden into an argument; for Mrs. Barrington, like most women, disliked to be pushed into dialectical corners, and nothing disturbed her more than to be forced to trace her assertions to their foundations in fact. This was not because she was arrogant, but because she was timid, and it must be confessed intellectually indolent; and it annoyed her to be made to clear out her own obscure places.

Meanwhile the illness of poor Grace went through its appointed stages, and the intercourse between the young doctor and the ladies of the Dower House grew insensibly closer and more intimate, as mental and personal harmonies overpowered conventional discords. One by one all Mrs. Barrington’s faint suspicions were set to rest. She even tolerated French authors of whom she knew nothing, save their nationality; and found pleasure in those sweet and simple little Romances whereof she knew neither the meaning nor the effect. To please her, the young man learnt one or two of Claribel’s most touching songs; and it became almost as regular a thing as the cup of afternoon tea, to ask Dr. St. Claire to go to the piano and sing ‘one of his sweet little songs.’

This was only when the mother and daughter were alone. When Theodosia was there the talk on literature was restricted, the practice of music was nil, and all things became stiffer, more reserved and less genial. Theodosia kept the ball rolling on her own account and in her own way, and would have been horribly disappointed had things been on the æsthetic footing which was the rule when she was absent. She always made Mrs. Barrington



cross, Monica uneasy, and Armine somewhat embarrassed when she came. But perhaps this restraint was better for them all than too much of that sweet seductive intercourse which had even invaded Mrs. Barrington's sense of fitness and had given such dangerous reality to Monica's dreams.

One day Armine found Miss Barrington alone. Her mother was engaged for the moment in the library, where she transacted all her business. One of Anthony's tenants had come to ask her to intercede for him about the renewal of his lease on the old terms; and as his story was pitiable and Anthony had been manifestly harsh and unjust, the dear woman felt bound to listen to the end, if with no certainty of ultimate good, yet with the feeling of giving present consolation. And even an hour snatched from pain counted for something in her estimate of things. Thus Dr. St. Claire and Monica were left for about a quarter of an hour alone—the first time such a chance had befallen them.

The conversation somehow turned on the modern outbreak of individualism and public ambition in women; and Armine, though against all excess, as was to be expected from a man of his type, was so far a child of the generation as to be the champion of a certain amount of free will and independence in women, especially in those things which were in themselves beautiful. Monica, on the contrary, represented the seclusion of home and the wholly domestic duties of past ages.

'A certain amount?' she said with a smile. 'But does it not all depend on what is that certain amount? What one person thinks allowable, a second thinks is not enough, and a third too much. So where are we to fix the line?'

'Where would *you* place it?' he asked, looking into her eyes.

'I? oh! I am not of the modern school at all,' she answered, her colour deepening. 'My mother's will is my rule of right, and my home the dearest and happiest place in the world.'

'Still, if not for yourself, you might make limits for others,' he said. 'All young ladies are not so fortunate as you, either in circumstance or disposition. What would you do with one who had a very pronounced artistic or intellectual gift—Rosa Bonheur say, Mrs. Siddons, Grisi, Mrs. Somerville?—would you have had all these quench the light that was in them for the sake of leading purely domestic lives?'

'No, not these,' said Monica, to whom, as to others, the success of a thing already done creates its own principle but gives no precedent for the unknown.

'Then if not these, why any?' he asked, smiling.

'But these were such glorious women!' she answered naïvely.

'They proved their gloriousness only by trial,' he argued. 'We are all potentialities of unknown value till we are tested. While in the egg an eagle is indistinguishable from a vulture or a barn-



door fowl, and incubation, which is proof, alone shows the difference. The analogy holds good for mental powers. If we are not allowed endeavour, there can be no success, and the divine fire within us dies down for want of air to feed it and space wherein to burn.'

'But true genius always makes its way. It is irrepressible,' said Monica.

'You mean that when it does, it does,' he answered. 'And what about the mute, inglorious Miltons who never get a chance to show what is in them?—the buried seeds which are not helped to come to the light and have not power of themselves to lift up the paving-stone? Had these women we have spoken of been forcibly kept from following the bent of their genius, they would not have been the shining lights they were. But how many would not have been as great if they could but have had the means of showing themselves? And surely in the rising generation of girls there are some as gifted as those who have gone before, and who want only leave to develop—only the liberty to rise to their full height. As I said; disallow endeavour, and success is impossible.'

'Still it is better for girls to be dutiful to their parents, and content to remain at home, than to be just like so many boys, restless and dissatisfied till they can go out into the world and fling off all the duties of family life for ambition and excitement,' said Monica, womanlike escaping from the logical consequences of an argument by doubling back on the main principle.

'Certainly. All the same, genius should have its possibilities of expression,' said Armine. 'And beautiful as the home life is—and no one values it more than I,' he said with strange emphasis, 'there are times when most young people feel that it is both restricted and arid. You yourself, Miss Barrington, are there never days when you dream of a wider horizon—a more purely ideal existence?'

He drew his bow at a venture, and the shaft struck home. He was startled, and more than startled, by the expression which came into Monica's usually still and dreamy face. Her large soft eyes blazed with sudden fire; her cheeks grew pale with living passion; her lips half parted; her head was thrown back; her whole air and attitude rapt, yearning, full of unspoken aspiration and unsatisfied desire, told the hidden story of her mind, the secret of her life.

'Oh!' she said in a low moved voice, clasping her hands together, 'if only I could!'

For a moment she hid her face behind those hands still clasped together, the fingerstightly interlaced and the palms turned outward; and the silence which follows an astounding revelation fell between them. When she lowered her hands and looked up, the fire had died down, the passion had burned itself out, and only the soft, sad, dreamy quiescence of her usual self remained.

'Obedience to parents is the best of all things,' she said gently; and her voice sounded like a sigh.

St. Claire was looking at her earnestly; so earnestly that she could not meet his eyes.

'You hold this obedience high?' he said, speaking slowly.

'Yes, I do,' she answered.

'Above all other things?'

'Yes,' she said again. 'Obedience at least to a mother from a daughter.'

'To the extinction of genius, by which an art would be perfected and humanity improved?'

'I cannot even imagine the circumstances where it would not be the first and highest duty—where it would not be better to make one's mother happy than to earn distinction for oneself and to please a multitude,' she answered.

'You advocate, then, the sacrifice of every form of personal desire to this same principle?' he added, not looking at her but carefully examining the edge of one of her wood-work tools.

'Yes,' she answered.

'You would fling your lover overboard at the desire of your parents? You would never be Juliet? Yet how much poorer both the world and life would be without that love, stronger than death, which broke through all barriers and defied even a parent's will!'

As he spoke his voice trembled in spite of himself. He had wished to appear calm and disinterested, not taking advantage of that sudden revelation of hidden life, and putting an hypothetical case quite impartially. But that tell-tale voice betrayed him more than he desired.

A deep blush came into Monica's face and stayed there, burning like fire on her cheeks. She recovered herself, and answered with studied indifference:

'All this is a question with which I have nothing to do—never could have anything to do. If my mother wished me to marry, I would; and I would not if she did not wish it.'

'You would yield yourself in implicit obedience, without will or choice of your own?'

'Yes; without will or choice of my own,' she said.

'You would marry where you did not love? refuse where you did?'

'It should be entirely as my mother wished,' was her reply.

He turned away. His heart was full of pain, and his face expressed his trouble. He did not know if she had or had not understood him—nor whether she had answered simply, according to the faith that was in her, or with purpose, to warn him betimes. Either way she had been explicit; and she had spoken as if she had meant what she said—as if it were a vital and active principle

of her life, and not one merely adopted for show and the occasion. Before all things then, she was a Daughter; and neither her individuality nor her love, neither intellect nor passion, counted in comparison with her devotion to her mother. It was a lesson which she had set him to learn—hard, distasteful, desolating; but he must take it to heart and abide by its teaching.

All this passed through his mind like successive waves of pain, while she, with her face still deeply flushed, but strangely fixed and rigid, sat carelessly turning over the leaves of a book—seeing nothing of the pages which she was making such heroic endeavours to appear to read—that she might accentuate still more pointedly her personal unconcern in the conversation on hand.

A dead silence fell again between them, and for several moments neither spoke. At last Armine said, in a low and altered voice:

‘Your obedience is sublime, Miss Barrington; but—may I say so without impertinence?—you carry your principle too far. Your virtue goes over to the other side.’

‘Do you think so?’ she answered, still turning over the leaves of the book. ‘I think that is impossible.’

‘And that other?—that other whose life you mar?—whose heart you break?’ said Armine, in a tender, pleading way.

‘There must never be that other,’ said Monica very gently, but firmly also. ‘He would be warned in time.’

‘And if love were stronger than prudence? and warnings were like waves beating against the sea-wall?’ Armine asked.

She raised her eyes and looked him full and calmly in the face. This was a point whereon she felt strong, and could afford to look the whole world in the face.

‘In that case,’ she said quietly, ‘there would be two martyrs to principle instead of one. But the principle of my devotion to my mother, and of my entire obedience to her, would be always paramount.’

At this moment Mrs. Barrington entered the room, having finished her colloquy with the poor fellow whom her son was bent on ruining for punishment of some fancied insolence, and the young doctor could say no more. So much had the conversation taught him, that Monica would never cross her mother’s will for love of living man, and that he who would win her must first gain the favour of sweet-natured and exclusive Mrs. Barrington—that model of gracious Christian practice and high-caste Brahminical principle.

‘I am sorry to have detained you so long, Dr. St. Claire,’ she said, coming forward with that quickened step which means apology and redeeming by seconds the time that has been lost in hours.

‘It does not signify,’ he answered with conventional politeness. ‘I am not busy to-day.’

Had he spoken as he felt, he would have thanked her for her

delay. Assuredly there was nothing in it to regret, save perhaps that result of sadder knowledge.

‘And Grace?’ the lady asked, still standing.

He went into the present aspect of the case, superficially, giving just so much professional accuracy as he thought well—no more. As he added a few technical terms, judiciously thrown in, the dear woman was perfectly satisfied, flattered by this compliment to her supposed knowledge, and possessed of the belief that now she understood the whole science and mystery of double pneumonia, with its dangers, its difficulties, and its remedies. He took his leave so soon as he had made his report; as was expected of him. But when he said good-morning to Monica, he did not shake hands with her as usual.

Deeply flushed as her face already was, the hard colour in her cheeks burnt with increased fire as she raised her dark-grey eyes with a sudden half-shy and half-reproachful look to his. Did that look really mean a half-reproach to him, or was he foolish for thinking that it did? He could not now cross the room and go round to where she stood, merely to shake hands with her as a sign of reconciliation and to lift off that dumb reproach!

He would had he dared; but he dared not. What would Mrs. Barrington think? and Monica herself? and the chance that his interpretation was a mistake? And yet, it might be true!

It was a small matter for a man to worry about—an apparently trivial, worthless, insignificant and utterly absurd little matter. Yet it threw him into a strange fever of uncertainty and contradictory self-reproach, as he drove through the country lanes on his various errands of healing or despair. He was in a strange state of fever and uncertainty altogether to-day. Never before had he found it so difficult to harmonise his life and co-ordinate possibilities with desires—never before had the difference between a man’s social credit and personal worth seemed to him so bewildering, and the world’s award so unequal and unjust. By birth, education, and inherited status he stood every inch Monica Barrington’s equal; by his father’s misfortunes and his own present circumstances he was immeasurably her inferior. Must then the lowered social standard of his present condition absolutely and for ever destroy the higher measure of his past? or might that higher measure and his own individual worth exalt and ennoble the lower social standard of his present condition? Might the son of the Marquis de Sainte Claire claim as his equal the daughter of the Barringtons? or was the country doctor at Oakhurst worse than mad to aspire to an alliance with one of the oldest of the county families of Fellshire?

## CHAPTER V.

## MAKING HIS WAY.

WITH unconscious hypocrisy Dr. St. Claire made that kind of love to Mrs. Barrington which young men are wont to make to elderly women when they wish to get something out of them—whether it be present patronage or a future legacy, an invitation to dinner, a loan of doubtful repayment, or leave to marry the daughter. He talked to her on her favourite subjects; followed her lead whether he agreed with her or no; and always let her have the last word. He asked her advice on private little matters of his own, where he said he felt at sea, and where the judgment of such a person as herself was invaluable. By the policy of instinct rather than by the forecasting of design, he threw into his manner a certain almost filial tone of half-caressing tenderness—that kind of tenderness which she had often missed and always regretted in Anthony. But he was profoundly respectful withal; having that rare gift, accorded to so few—the power of showing respect through familiarity, and of being caressing, tender and intimate, but neither forward nor obtrusive.

He made his professional visits to the sick maid a pleasant domestic feature in the lady's day, and brought with him a sense of moral sunshine which brightened for the time the colourless atmosphere of the Dower House. And as all that he did was done with sincerity of feeling, if the end was somewhat different from what appeared, Mrs. Barrington had never cause to be startled and was content with things as they were.

Most of all she was content with this nice young fellow who made himself so agreeable, and who was creeping slowly but surely into the sacred place of her affections. She sincerely liked him for what he was—a man who was not her social equal, but whose humanity was refreshing and delightful in its own way. His manners were quiet, his attitudes graceful, his words well-chosen, and the tones of his voice were harmonious and sympathetic. He had no strong views on any subject and he was well-informed on all. He was without violent antipathies or inconvenient enthusiasms, and he had neither intellectual crazes nor overpowering passions. When he talked it was with judgment and moderation. His topics were never painful and always free from doubtful issues. He never touched the bolder chords, the darker themes of life or human nature, and he was eminently safe and soothing. His conversation, with its mild optimism and level philosophy, refreshed Mrs.



Barrington, where that of others exhausted her. For the old value this kind of moral quietude more than the vigorous young can understand. The fiery passions, the tumultuous emotions, the mental unrest, the very intellectual earnestness itself of youth, fatigues them like bodily exertion, or the restless activities of children; while the mild, calm, equable temper, the superficial philosophy which looks only on the bright side of things and leaves the dark alone, is in harmony with their condition, and suits them like the noon-day turn in the garden, the evening game at *bézique*, and the gossip columns of the newspaper, which make up the sum of their exertions and emotions.

Mrs. Barrington took it all as it came to her; and that the young man should be so mad, so wicked, as to seek to please her for the sake of her daughter, was a contingency as far from her mind as that he should plan a robbery or commit a murder. Good women, who have lived all their lives in the country, are not prone to think evil of their neighbours. They know too little of the realities of life to have had their senses sharpened by experience at first hand; and the close-set borders of their own '*huis-clos*' have not been pierced by information from others. Things therefore, which to those who know the world are accepted as matters of course, are to them either absolutely unknown or anathema marathanath—the possibility of which is not to be received in decent society. Wherefore Mrs. Barrington believed that Dr. St. Claire's attentions to her were the result of his natural sweetness, which made him wish to please her for her own sake; and as she would as soon have suspected the footman of cherishing a tender passion for her daughter as she would have suspected him, she received all his pleasant ways with gentle cordiality and a benevolent kind of condescension to which her age, state, temper and bearing gave a special charm.

What Monica thought remained her own secret only. She made no confidences and betrayed no consciousness; and Theodosia, who often found herself at five o'clock tea at the Dower House, saw nothing more than it was intended she should see. For certain reasons of her own, and always following up the bewildering lead which she had made for herself, she could not possibly suppose that her quiet sister-in-law had any attraction for one whom she was resolute to see only as the pitiable victim of a hopeless attachment to herself. She was always very kind to the young doctor. She meant to be provocative; but the dew of her coquetry fell on stony and ungrateful soil; and had Armine been able to read the secret writing of Theodosia's heart towards him, he would have been as utterly astounded as would gentle Mrs. Barrington had she been able to read that little love poem printed on his and addressed to her daughter. It was a game of blind man's buff all round, and no one knew the exact place of the other.

One day the conversation turned on unequal marriages. Society round Oakhurst was much exercised at this time because of the choice which had been made by a certain young Mr. Meade, the heir to a fine estate and the future head of an influential family. He had fallen in love with, and married, an innkeeper's daughter—a good girl enough, pretty, well-mannered, well-educated and of irreproachable conduct; but without the soft fringe of social velvet—without even a tag of inherited purple to glorify her fine and cleanly homespun. He himself was simply a boor—an example of atavism and recurrence to the original type; as we find at times in old families where the sons have been suffered to run wild about the village, and to make their prime friends of ratcatchers and gamekeepers. He spoke with a strong provincial accent; haunted public-houses; liked a game at skittles in the back-alley better than billiards in his father's house; was familiar with barmaids and awkward with ladies; read nothing save a sporting newspaper, which he had to spell like a schoolboy; could do little more than write his name; and he kept his betting-book by an arithmetic of his own composing. For all that he was born into the inheritance of the purple, and he was the son of a county family. Woman for man, Daisy Cross was immeasurably superior to Frank Meade in everything which makes the worth of a human being. Still it was a *mésalliance*, according to the canons of caste, and it had excited a great deal of uncomfortable feeling in the neighbourhood.

Mrs. Barrington was never bitter. That was not her way. Nevertheless, gentle as she was in manner, she was inflexible in matter, and she held her views with the firmness proper to those whose views represent to them principles, and whose principles are founded on what they believe to be divine command and law. She would have been false to her own idea of right had she slackened in faithful testimony and uncompromising condemnation. And such a marriage of this of Frank Meade's together with all the new order of thought—all the tendencies of modern society—was to her iniquitous, revolutionary, and to be fought against as Christian fought against Apollyon.

'I think it infinitely shocking!' she said. 'The Meades are an old family, settled in the county for the last three hundred years, and it is simply impious for the eldest son to make such a marriage. How can he hold his proper place in society with an innkeeper's daughter for his wife? What kind of influence can he have? And think of the example! It is appalling to see the way in which the world is going. We are rushing headlong to the destruction of everything that is good and noble.'

'It is certainly a great pity,' said St. Claire; 'still Mrs. Frank Meade is in herself quite unexceptionable. I hear her very well spoken of everywhere, and I remember to have seen her once when I was called in consultation to a case in her father's house.'

'Her father's house—the "Marshal Blucher"! ' laughed Theodosia, shrilly, tossing her small vivacious head.

'Still, dear Theo, an inn is a house, is it not?' put in Monica, with a soft smile.

'But we do not speak of an innkeeper's daughter living in her father's house like a lady,' repeated Theo.

'No?' said Dr. St. Claire, quite tranquilly. 'I will amend the record, if I am wrong. In any case she struck me as very well-bred, and she is certainly pretty.'

'Were you Frank Meade's rival?' asked Theodosia, audaciously. 'You speak as warmly as if you had had pretensions in the same direction yourself.'

By nature Armine St. Claire was a woman-worshipper, and constitutionally disinclined to cross swords with the sex. He could bear a great deal of impertinence from a pretty woman and feel no resentment; but this thrust touched him to the quick. The blood rushed into his face and his eyes grew dark and angry. His lip curled with sudden contempt and his voice trembled in spite of himself.

'No;' he said with infinite pride, infinite disdain, such as they had never seen in him before, nor supposed him capable of feeling; 'because I say that Miss Cross is a nice girl for her station, and pretty, and well-educated, that does not make me Mr. Frank Meade's rival. The favours of an innkeeper's daughter are scarcely in my line, Mrs. Barrington!'

'I did not mean to offend you,' laughed Theodosia, delighted with her power of rousing and exciting. 'But I must say it looked like it.'

'You have no right to say so,' said Armine, warmly.

She shrugged her neat round shoulders and again tossed her head. But she looked into his face with a smile and an expression in her eyes which he was not quick-witted enough to read. She thought he had laid an emphasis on the word *you*, and that he meant to reproach her for her cruelty in wilfully mistranslating him. He meant nothing of the kind. But he had the benefit of the hallucination—which was something.

'Still, being a nice girl for an innkeeper's daughter does not make her fit to be the wife of a country gentleman,' said Mrs. Barrington, a little astonished by this sudden outburst of indignation from the young doctor to her son's wife.

'No;' said Dr. St. Claire; 'not if put in an abstract form. But Mr. Meade is not equal to his position, and his wife is superior to hers; so they meet.'

'And if he is not equal to his position, all the more reason that he should have married some one who could have raised him and kept him out of low company,' returned Mrs. Barrington. 'We have not only the individual to think of—we have the family and

the social position. All these unequal marriages are bad,' she went on rather warmly. 'People should keep in their own sphere. No good can come of this confusion of classes.'

'But I think Dr. St. Claire is right—sometimes we might make an exception, where the person is very nice indeed, very superior,' said Theodosia, looking full into Armine's face.

She knew that she was very naughty to give this young Lovelace such a broad hint; but no harm could come of it. Anthony was not going to die, and however much in love with her he might be, she did not suppose the handsome young doctor would presume to ask her to run off with him. It was all nothing—just a little excitement in this dull monotonous life of Oakhurst, where she had none of the fun of danger and none of the pleasure of pain.

St. Claire turned his eyes in answer on her. This time they flashed, not with anger, but with gratitude that looked like love. She was half-frightened by that look, and wished she had been a little less incautious—a little more sparing. But the mischief was done now—and how handsome he looked when he was roused!

'It is sometimes a little difficult to define social station,' he said, that wonderful light still burning in his eyes. 'Money makes one test, birth another; but birth without money—where would you place that?'

'Always as a gentleman, of course,' said dear Mrs. Barrington, in colloquial syntax.

The blood again rushed into his face. How sensitive he was to-day!

'You think so,' he said quickly, with a rapid glance at Monica. 'So do I.'

'Of course supposing a good education, refinement of feeling, and nice manners—else not,' said Mrs. Barrington, receding from her first position and modifying the breadth of her verdict, as she remembered the watchmaker who might have been the Dauphin; that Welsh blacksmith who claimed as his ancestor the bluff King Hal whose portraits he so marvellously resembled; as well as other undoubted descendants of bygone fallen greatness. 'And then again,' she added, doubt deepening with reflection, 'birth without money or position is difficult to imagine. For why is it poor? There must have been some fault somewhere; and a long line of ancestry ending in dishonour is more shameful than natural obscurity.'

'There may be misfortune,' he said. 'Misfortune is not dishonour.'

'No, certainly not,' responded Theodosia, briskly. 'Misfortune is interesting.'

Mrs. Barrington shook her head.

'I do not believe much in unmerited misfortunes,' she said.

'Conduct is fate; and for misfortune we ought for the most part to read fault.'

'Always? without exception?' Armine asked in an earnest kind of way, somewhat as if he were holding his breath.

'Mamma! how hard you are!' said Theodosia, still in her character of the sweet seductive temptress—the high-born lady receiving from her inferior the homage she would not refuse and the love she could not return.

'There is no rule without an exception,' said Mrs. Barrington, gently. 'Of course there may have been afflictions which have reduced a fine estate and made the family beggars; but it is a difficult state of things to imagine without fault and with prudence.'

'And you, Miss Barrington?' asked Dr. St. Claire, abruptly turning to Monica, who all this time had been sitting with down-cast eyes as if studying to the minutest line a wood-work pattern which Armine had brought her. 'Do you think that misfortune necessarily presupposes fault and is worthy of only blame?'

'I think with my mother:—In general, but not always, conduct is fate,' she answered rather slowly, looking at her mother, not at Armine.

It was a safe answer. There could not have been one safer, less explicit, or more generalised.

'And in those exceptional cases where a man of good birth and education has been made poor by no fault of his own—forced into a lower social position than was his by inheritance—in those cases you would allow that he was still a gentleman, emphatically and thoroughly, and the equal of those among whom he was born?'

'Certainly,' said Monica, and as she said this she looked into his face.

'But even if he has not been to blame himself, his people must have been in fault,' said Mrs. Barrington, still more and more cautious as the talk seemed to slip somewhat from her guidance. 'We must always take this into consideration;—it is in the blood, and that is as bad as if in the individual.'

'The father may have been unfortunate without blame,' said Armine.

Mrs. Barrington smiled with a sigh.

'Of course that is possible,' she said. 'But in any case we have to bear our burdens. When the fathers eat sour grapes the children's teeth are set on edge. It is by the Divine decree, and we cannot escape it. Every action bears its consequences; every seed has its fruit.'

'Then you would exile from your society such a one?' he asked.

He had never pushed an argument so far before. In general he was careful to allow the dear lady, whose favour he had set himself to win as the first step towards that greater gain of the daughter's—the lady with whom he was feeling his way so patiently—in



general he was careful to allow her all the honours of victory without the fatigue of the struggle. She might state her opinion in the broadest and loosest way imaginable, and he never pushed her to logical conclusions nor to those closer definitions which women so mortally dislike. She might lay down the law as hard and fast as so many paving-stones, and he never objected to upheaval here, to crookedness there. But to-day he was quite different from his usual self. He felt the talk to be so vital to his future that he must run the risk of wearying and annoying in order to clear the ground.

'He could expect nothing else than to be excluded if he had sunk into another sphere,' said Mrs. Barrington.

'Never to be rehabilitated, so that he should take his rightful place?—make an alliance, form an attachment say, among his former equals?'

Theodosia lowered her eyes and bit her lips.

'What a horribly imprudent young fellow he is!' she thought. 'I shall have to snub him if he is so rash as this!'

Monica too lowered her eyes, but she grew pale, not crimson like her sister-in-law.

'That would depend on the condition to which he had been brought,' said Mrs. Barrington, whose sight was dim and who saw nothing of these changeful cheeks. 'I confess I could not quite reconcile myself to the idea of a man who had been a shopkeeper, say, even though he had been born a gentleman. And as for marriage—as I said about Frank Meade's, I think this ought to be essentially between equals in all things. It does not do for a woman to be able to look down on her husband in any particular. On the contrary, she ought to look up to him as her natural superior as well as her social equal. If there is to be any inequality, let it be on the side of his superiority, not hers. But the social line of each should be equal.'

'And you, Miss Barrington?' St. Claire asked of Monica again, rashly tempting fate.

She looked at her mother, a sad, set, artificial smile about her mouth.

'You always hear my views from my mother. We think alike in all things,' she said; but her voice was neither clear nor steady as she spoke, and her face was of almost death-like pallor.

'Forgive me. I have forgotten time in talk,' said St. Claire, rising abruptly. 'I am afraid I must have wearied you, Mrs. Barrington; but the conversation interested me. I apologise.'

His voice too, like Monica's, was neither clear nor steady; his face matched hers in its deadly whiteness; and his lips quivered as he spoke.

'Oh no, I am not wearied,' said Mrs. Barrington kindly, holding out her hand. 'Time does slip away so very quickly in conver-

sation! And I do not think we have agreed in our views to-day quite so well as usual,' she added with a smile, ignorant of the hidden meaning of this sad little interchange of words.

'I am sure it has been very interesting—and you talk so well, Dr. St. Claire,' said Theodosia, hardily, as she shook hands with him in her turn.

'Thank you,' he said simply, and pressed her hand as he spoke. Praise spoken before Monica and her mother was very sweet to him.

Monica said nothing. She merely raised her eyes to his, to all appearance with undisturbed serenity. But perhaps a close observer would have seen behind their usual dreamy melancholy something that was more real than dreams, something that was more active than melancholy.

'Good-bye,' she said in a cold voice; and Theodosia thought to herself: 'What an icicle that Monica is! She is as wooden as if carved out of an old bit of park-paling! I should like to shake her!'

So that, what between wrong vision and no vision at all, the truth of things connected with Armine St. Claire was in a very disturbed and cloudy condition.

When he had gone, Mrs. Barrington said, with an accent of surprise rather than of displeasure:

'What a strange mood Dr. St. Claire was in to-day! I have never seen him so odd and uncomfortable.'

'No,' said Monica.

'Why? What fault do you find with him, mamma?' said Theodosia.

'He was so argumentative, my dear; so unlike his usual self. He is generally so respectful and pleasant, but to-day he was all pins and needles, and so extraordinarily pertinacious! I could not make him out at all.'

'I thought him very pleasant,' said Theodosia in italics. 'I like to hear him argue; he speaks so well.'

'It is scarcely his place, my dear, to argue with me,' said Mrs. Barrington, with a gentle kind of pride infinitely impressive, and as characteristic as impressive.

Mrs. Anthony Barrington turned away her head and answered in the air by making a small grimace. It relieved her own feelings; Mrs. Barrington did not see it; and no one knew whether Monica caught the disrespect which it involved or no.

'His charm hitherto,' continued the elder lady, 'has been in his nice respectful ways, the quickness of his tact, and the very proper deference that he has shown me. I should be sorry to think that I had spoiled him by my indulgence—that I had taken him out of his proper sphere and turned his head by over-kindness.'

'Yes,' said Monica, to whom her mother looked for an answer; 'it would be a pity.'

She spoke with the same kind of weary dragging feeling that one has when plodding heavily over a ploughed field. It was an effort to speak at all; to assent to this theory of spheres and social distances was a pain almost unendurable.

'Perhaps something has happened—to a friend of his—which has disturbed him,' said Theodosia, pulling down her lips. 'Some—friend—may have loved above himself, and all that we have been speaking of may have struck home on that account.'

'Perhaps; very likely there is something of the kind,' said Mrs. Barrington. 'That explains all, poor young man! He is evidently an affectionate kind of creature, and I imagine would be greatly distressed by any pain to one whom he loved.'

'Yes,' said Monica, dreamily; and 'Yes,' said Theodosia, demurely; adding to that inner self to whom she made her confidences: 'What a goose mamma is! She can be made to believe anything. And she is as blind as ten thousand bats!'

## CHAPTER VI.

### A STEP ONWARD.

A FEW evenings after this odd little talk on unequal marriages at the Dower House, young Mrs. Barrington proposed to her husband that they should give a dinner-party. They were the great dinner-givers in the neighbourhood, and anything served as an occasion for the display of the massive family plate, and the distribution of that rare old port about which men talked as lovingly as of their wives or horses. This, now proposed, was based on a week's visit, which an old school-fellow of Theodosia's, one Lucy Lester, Sir John Lester's daughter, was about to pay them; and as Theo said: 'They must make it pleasant for her, poor girl;' they would have a dinner-party to begin with.

'Very well,' said Anthony. 'Be it so.'

Like many heavy men, he was fond of receiving in his own house, where he was the chief personage, and where he did things handsomely and set the neighbourhood an example.

'When shall it be? and who is to come?' he asked after a moment's pause.

'Lucy comes on Thursday, so it must be Thursday,' said Theodosia. 'Let us make out the list. I should like fourteen; our table holds fourteen so comfortably, and it is a nice number. Your mother and sister, of course, will be asked, but mamma will not come. So Monica will be here alone, and we must have Edward Formby as her cavalier. By-the-bye, Anthony, when is that

coming off?' she added with a pretty little petulant air. 'When are they going to marry?'

Anthony's face grew dark. Every man has his sore place, and this was his. In the whole run of his life, nothing annoyed him so much as the inexplicable delay in this affair. And whose fault was it? That was the difficulty! Had he known whom to rate, he would not have been long before setting about his task; but it was just the vagueness of everything which made the discomfort.

'Why do you ask me, Theo?' he answered irritably. 'How should I know? They know their own affairs best. How the deuce can I tell more than yourself?'

'Now don't be such a dear old bear!' said Theo, who saw that she had made a false start by setting her husband's teeth on edge. She had her own reasons for wishing to keep him in good humour, and she had done the very thing to put him wrong. 'I will not have little wifey spoken to like that—such a cross old bear as it is!' she added, leaving her place and going over to her husband on whose strong knee she perched herself, while she ran her dainty little jewelled fingers through his close-cropped stubby hair and smoothed his shaggy over-hanging eyebrows.

'Was I cross?' said Anthony, his stolid face brightening into a smile. What a fascinating little witch it was! No man in the kingdom had such a charming little wife as he—no man! 'I did not mean to be a bear, Theo,' he added amiably.

'Then say "I'se sorry,"' said Theodosia, putting his broad hands together in an attitude of supplication.

'You little goose!' he laughed.

'Say "I'se sorry," else I will get off his knee and go into a corner and cry,' she persisted.

'No; you shall not do that; so here goes;—"I'se sorry,"' said Anthony, smooth as satin and soft as down.

'Good boy! Now I'll give him a butterfly kiss,' returned Theodosia, fluttering her long eyelashes rapidly over his cheek.

'I would rather have one from your lips, my pet,' he said tenderly.

She kissed him prettily. She never refused her caresses when she had anything to gain; and she had something to gain now.

'Now then,' she said, when she had kissed him; 'that's done, so we'll go on with our dinner!'

She went on with the tale of names and pairings; and after due selection and rejection got up to thirteen without much difficulty. But here she seemed to have come to the end of her resources. Some imp seemed to have taken possession of that fourteenth place and to have resolved that no living man should oust him. No one whom her husband proposed would she accept. She had strong and unanswerable reasons against each and all, but a fourteenth of course they must have; and it must be a gentleman to match the odd lady on the list. Whom could they ask? Nor

this nor that would do. It was really very tiresome ; whom could they have ?

'I tell you what it is, Anthony,' at last said Theodosia, her face lightening as if a sudden thought touching on inspiration had struck her. 'We will have Dr. St. Claire.'

'That apothecary fellow ?' said Anthony Barrington, in frank amazement. 'My dear Theo, have you taken leave of your senses ? Are you mad ?'

'Not that I know of !' she laughed. 'What are the symptoms ? Should I want to bite my boo'ful old bear ? I would rather pat his dear old face instead,' she said, suiting the action to the word, and laying her soft little hands caressingly on his cheeks. 'No, I hope I am not mad,' she went on to say, making a distractingly pretty face ; 'for then I should have to go into a horrid lunatic asylum—poor little me ! Poor old bear too ! How would he get on without his little wifey ! No sir, I am not mad, and we will have Dr. St. Claire as our fourteenth.'

'Theo ! child ! how can you propose such an incongruity at a dinner given for Lucy Lester !' said Anthony, more and more amazed at this failure in the nice conduct of things of one whom he fondly hoped he had educated up to the right point.

'Why not ?' she said, opening her eyes to their widest. 'She will not fall in love with him, I suppose, and he makes a good appearance. He is far handsomer and better bred than that odious Frank Meade who has disgraced himself so much. And yet we shall be obliged to have him and his barmaid wife, as the county has agreed to receive them. Dr. St. Claire is miles better than they !' she added petulantly, as if in praising him she was condemning the other—not praising for positive commendation but for comparative blame.

'But Frank Meade is the son of a county family,' began Anthony, remonstratingly.

She stopped his mouth with a flyaway kiss.

'Dear old bearikins need say no more,' she said. 'Little wifey has made up her mind, and there's an end of it. Kiss her then, and say he is a good old bear, and she will pour him out another glass of wine.'

'Theo ! you really are too childish, my darling,' he said.

But he smiled as he spoke, and in another moment had said the prescribed formula and received his reward.

So this was the way in which young Mrs. Barrington managed her heavy-visaged husband and got her will of him—twisted him round her little finger, as people said. And this was how it came about that Dr. St. Claire was asked to a dinner at the Manor, given to 'nice people,' in honour of a baronet's daughter. It was the longest social stride he had yet made ; would it bring him any nearer to his goal ?

The day of Lucy Lester's arrival, and consequent dinner-party



at the Manor, came in its course; and the guests in ordinary holiday humour assembled as they were bidden. It was rather provoking perhaps that Dr. St. Claire was just in the same kind of holiday humour as were these others, and showed no special consciousness of the honour that had been done to him. He came in like anyone else, only rather handsomer, rather more graceful, and undeniably more distinguished in appearance than the rest, but neither more radiant nor more humble; really as if he were quite accustomed to be petted by pretty married women to whom he had made love by his eyes, and to be received as an equal in the stiff drawing-rooms of Brahminical county families.

Theodosia did not know whether to like him better for his quiet audacity, or to feel disappointed by his ingratitude and affronted by his coolness. She wondered what it meant. Was it to show her that he was to be trusted for delicacy and discretion? Did he wish her to understand that he was used to this kind of thing, and master of the situation through long apprenticeship? She had expected him to make a secret sign of some sort—to say or do something to show that he understood and appreciated her grace. And here he was, as calm and unmoved as if he had been asked to high tea at Flora Farley's, or a romping game at loo at Madge Langhorne's! This was all her reward for the trouble she had taken to get him here at all—coaxing that cross old Anthony of hers into a good humour, and making her eyelids ache with her butterfly kisses! What did he mean by it? There was something underneath that quiet assumption of equality which she could not quite make out; what was it?

Anthony's wife asked herself these questions in vain. She generally did ask herself questions in vain. Her mind was always at work about some perfectly useless problem, busying itself in surmises and suspicions as baseless as so many castles in the clouds—her thoughts were for ever twirling and fluttering like the filmy fins of the hippocampus, but doing no good to herself or to others—carrying her no higher in moral perception, no farther in intellectual discernment. Hers was of the humming-bird order of intelligence—doubtless fulfilling some useful purpose in the world of man and mind—but what that purpose was no expert had yet been found keen enough to determine.

As for Anthony, to whom the well-bred young doctor was a creature of a lower race, secretly resenting his being here at all, he was as much annoyed by the fellow's quiet assumption of equality as he would have been by any show of any conscious difference. Whether the lamb drinks at the source or the outfall it is the same to the wolf. And on this special occasion Anthony was the wolf and Armine St. Claire was the lamb.

The disposition of her guests at the table had been an anxious study to Theodosia. She would have liked to have given St. Claire

the second place of honour next herself, but she dared not put him too much en évidence, nor show him too great attention. She had the craft as well as the daring of her kind, and knew both how to creep in ambush and how to carry by assault. So she placed the handsome young doctor the third from her—near enough to be included in her own immediate circle, but not unduly exalted in the eyes of the watching world. He was thus immediately opposite Edward Formby and Monica Barrington.

Next to giving him Monica for his own share, Theodosia could not have done better for Armine than she had done; and for an instant he was weak enough to ask himself the question—as futile as Theodosia's—What did she mean by it? Was it by accident or design? Was it ignorance of his feelings or kindly interest in his desires? Any way, failing the supreme delight of being by Miss Barrington's side, this was the best place at the table for him, and he was more grateful to his feather-headed little hostess than she would have been glad to have known.

He made as much use of his opportunity for observation as he dared—remembering always the supreme need of careful reserve. He, like all the world, had heard of this understanding, which was not an engagement—of the marriage which everyone had arranged save the principals themselves. Somehow he did not quite believe in it. He would have been hard put to it to have said why, but he did not believe that Monica was in love with, or engaged to, her assigned husband. Still, as this was the first time he had met them so closely set together, he wanted to see for himself how things stood—so far as he could judge by looks and manners—and whether all hope for himself was cut off by this barrier as well as by some others. Wherefore he watched the two, carefully if prudently—so prudently that Theodosia, who was watching him, did not catch his pre-occupation.

As for Monica herself, well-schooled as she was in keeping the secret of her thoughts so that no one should discover them, she seemed to take no more interest in one person than in another. She talked to Edward Formby in the limp, nerveless, half-dreamy way of a well-bred girl who is both bored and patient; but she did not try to shuffle him off on to any other hands than her own; nor to draw anyone else into the languid stream of their tepid talk; nor to appear more alert and interested than she really was. She did not look across the table at St. Claire, of whose stealthily watching eyes she was keenly conscious; nor did she look much at Edward, nor spread herself abroad in any way. She was mainly interested in her bread-crumbs and the flowers in the low glass troughs; and for the rest, she accepted her position with that meek acquiescence in fate and the inevitable, which is so pathetic in certain women.

There was none of the impatience of regret in her, none of the

strife of struggle. She knew how her life was ordered for her by circumstances, and what was expected of her by her friends; and she accepted her lot as submissively as if she had been a daughter in the Middle Ages destined by her father to a nunnery, or a sister betrothed by her brothers to the baron while secretly in love with the squire. It was to no good that she did not wish to go into the nunnery—that she loved the squire and loathed the baron. Circumstance was too strong for her, and she had nothing for it but to submit. As now, when, conscious of what was expected of her, she must keep herself in hand and conquer her secret desires without letting the world know that she had had any to conquer at all. Some rebellions must be met by interdict; some victories must be celebrated in silence; and this was one of them. Wherefore Monica sat peaceably by the side of Edward Formby, the man designated by the fitness of things to be her husband; talking without interest on matters without vitality; chiefly occupied in crumbling her bread into dust which she piled into heaps with her little finger; while Armine St. Claire sat immediately opposite, making talk for the florid matron whom he had taken down, and longing for one look, only one, from the lady of his love, in vain.

Once and only once she looked directly at him. This was when Theodosia said in her sharp audacious way:

‘I hear that you are going to leave Oakhurst, Dr. St. Claire. Is it true?’

She had not heard this; but she wanted to say something that should startle him and turn his whole attention on herself. He was almost too conscientiously attentive to that florid matron assigned to him.

He flushed deeply and laughed lightly.

‘True? no indeed!—not that I know of!’ he said.

‘Oh, but I heard it!’ she persisted in that obstinate way of silly people who think if they can say, ‘I heard it,’ ‘I was told so,’ they have sufficiently established their case and refuted your disclaimer. ‘Some one told me—I forget now who it was. It was a lady, but I quite forget who. And she said that you told her you were going to leave because you did not find the place or people sufficiently interesting,’ she went on, her audacity of invention increasing with her fluency. ‘It was not a very flattering compliment to poor little us,’ she continued with a little grimace. ‘But I dare say you are right, and that we are a stupid set. I sometimes think so myself.’

‘Do you?’ answered Dr. St. Claire, again laughing lightly. ‘I do not agree with you, Mrs. Barrington. On the contrary, I think the society at Oakhurst very interesting indeed—some members of it especially so—and I have not the smallest intention of leaving.’

He looked at her while he spoke, and his misleading eyes lured

her on the same pathless way as before. No man, she thought, could look like that who did not feel! But what an imprudent young fellow he was! She wished now that she had left the still lake undisturbed, and had not flung into the waters that stone which might create a stronger ripple than she desired. Really those eyes of his were scarcely proper! As Jane Wintergreen had said in her sharp way:—They suggested the Divorce Court; and they did.

Then it was that, while Dr. St. Claire was looking at Theodosia and Theodosia was looking at him, Monica raised her dark-grey dreamy orbs and glanced across the table at the man who loved her and whose love she knew. She just glanced at him, no more, when he said that he found some members of the Oakhurst society specially interesting and that he did not intend to leave. But he, looking at her sister-in-law—that laughing, flushed, audacious and vivacious little sinner who liked nothing so well as to play with edged tools and to scatter wildfire all abroad—he did not see that one swift rapid look for which all through the dinner he had been longing in vain. When he brought back his eyes from Theodosia by way of Monica and his own partner, Monica's were once more fixed on Edward Formby's shirt-front, and she was saying in her sweet, limp, patient way, as one fulfilling a duty which must be performed at all cost:

'Have you any favourite horses now, Edward? Are you going to win the Derby?'

When the dinner was over and the 'gentlemen had joined the ladies,' the open order of the drawing-room allowed of new combinations; and Armine took advantage of the greater liberty of association permitted, to go up to Monica as she sat by a small table set in the corner of the room, turning over that everlasting resource of ennui, a book of photographs which she had seen at the least twenty times from end to end. He drew a low chair near her and sat down, beginning his conversation by the safe generalities of inquiring, How was her mother? and How the maid seemed to be going on? She was getting better by now, but she was still in his hands and legitimately inquired of.

'Mother is pretty well and Grace is getting on well,' said Monica, doing her best to be as quiet and limp with Armine St. Claire as she had been with Edward Formby. But in spite of herself, she felt as if she had suddenly received some accession of strength; as if her blood had been warmed by wine; as if her back-bone had become stiffened, her muscles more elastic, her whole being, moral and physical, enlivened, braced, invigorated. The grey clouds of her normal atmosphere lifted themselves in one swift breath of glory, and the sunshine gilded the whole earth in which she lived with beauty and radiance. There was nothing either novel or interesting in Dr. St. Claire's question, but the tones of his voice

roused her as if this inquiry after her mother's health and the servant's condition had opened vistas of illimitable pleasantness across the dead dulness of her ordinary life. Try as she would she could not retain her usual passive and uninterested bearing. Her pale lips smiled with frank delight and gracious tenderness, and the soft sweet dreamy eyes, which raised themselves as if suddenly waking out of sleep, had in them a certain something which Edward Formby had never seen and which no man save St. Claire had ever called forth. It was only for a moment that she looked, in this strangely responsive and awakened way, into the face bending forward on a lower level than her own; only for a moment that she smiled as we do smile when we have attained our desire and the circle of our joy is complete. But that short instant was gladness enough for St. Claire, living on low diet as he was, uncertain of everything—from her heart to his chances, from her circumstances to his own powers.

'And how gets on the work?' he said after a short pause. He had to make conversation only of commonplaces, while his whole being was strung with passion, his whole heart throbbing with emotion. 'Have the little boy and girl completed their courtship and joined hands among the flowers?'

This was in allusion to the subject of a wood-work frame, which he himself had designed for Monica—a quaint little couple of Dresden china figures done in cherry-wood for *pâte tendre*.

'Not quite,' she said with another smile, and something almost like a faint blush on her colourless face. 'The boy is done, but the little maiden is still only in the sketch. She is not carved into individuality.'

'She takes longer to create than he,' said St. Claire with affected carelessness. 'This too is human nature.'

'He is simpler and stands freer,' said Monica. 'She is more entangled in the flowers.'

'How pleasant it is to work at these fanciful things!' said St. Claire. 'When the realities of life go wrong what a relief it is to be able to lose one's own identity, as it were, in pretty little graceful pictures which amuse, or in deeper poems which absorb! What a joy it is to turn to a world where the sun always shines—where the flowers never fade and the birds ever sing—where life is always young, beauty unspoiled, and love always blessed! Do you not feel this, Miss Barrington? I know you do.'

She looked at him as she had looked once before—the secret of her soul gathered like summer lightning in her eyes.

'Yes,' she said fervently; then dropping her lids she added with a faint sigh: 'In one's own world one is at least free and happy.'

'And loved and loving,' said St. Claire in a low voice.

She did not answer, but somewhat nervously turned over the leaves of that everlasting book of photographs, and made believe to



find contentment in a little person in a large crinoline, her head turned back over her shoulder, her foot on a footstool, her hand on the back of a chair, the other holding a fan with languid grace, according to the favourite pose and accessories of a fashionable artist some five-and-twenty years ago.

'In one's own world at least one is above circumstance,' he continued.

'Yes,' she answered; 'in one's own world only.'

'And the doctrine that will is power?' he asked.

'It is a good phrase for that kind of vague excitement which helps young people,' said Monica, as staidly as if she had been sixty years old; 'but will is not always power,' she added with a slight negative movement of her head and hand; 'and circumstances do and must master us.'

'No; not if we will that they shall not,' he persisted.

'But when they represent duty?' asked Monica, not looking up.

'Then you will allow they are imperative.'

'Not above love,' was the rash reply, made in so low a voice that the very softness of the sentence attracted more attention than if it had been spoken freely and in an ordinary tone.

Three pairs of eyes were at this moment turned on these two as they sat together in the corner of the room, fencing with the subject that lay between them as a sleeping child which they must not waken and could not leave. Edward Formby, who liked Monica very well indeed—quite sincerely and unaffectedly, as a man likes a sweet and placid sister—though he had not the least objection to see her absorbed by the handsome doctor, was yet frankly surprised by the roused interest of her face. He himself had never called forth such vitality of feeling, such latent power of enthusiasm; and for a moment he felt somehow as if he had lost the chill companion of his future—the nunlike sister of his affections—and had found her again as the passionate priestess of an unknown cult, the torchbearer of a new light. He was at the other end of the room, talking to Lucy Lester, to whom he had just been presented; but he was not so fascinated by his pretty companion as not to see what was going on elsewhere; and the revelation given by Monica's face—which however he did not for an instant connect with St. Claire—startled him almost painfully. Theodosia too was watching them, half in displeasure half in amazement, thinking: What could those two be talking about? and Why was Monica all at once so much interested and excited? Such a stick as she was in general, why should she have brightened up into vivacity now? Was St. Claire looking into her eyes as he had looked into her own? and were two cords vibrating to the same delusive breath?

But when Anthony, looking about him as became the giver of the feast and the master of the house, spied out the one obnoxious guest in familiar converse with his sister, and that sister more

animated, more vivacious, more alert than was her wont, then the pleasant little drama came to an end, the lights were quenched, the music was hushed, and a rude hand tore down the graceful draperies which had clothed the stern realities of life with momentary beauty and illusion. Striding across the room he rather roughly told Monica that she ought to go and talk to Lucy Lester; she had not spoken to her yet, he said with a sullen frown on his heavy face; and she was the guest of the evening and Theodosia's old friend.

'Very well, dear,' said Monica, meekly. 'I will go.'

She looked with a swift yet pathetic look at St. Claire; making a slight inclination with her head as she left him to follow her brother. The wine had gone out of her veins, and she was once more limp and nerveless as she sat down by pretty Lucy and the man whom the fitness of things had designated as her own husband when the times were ripe, and talked in her sweet dreamy way on matters wherein she felt no kind of interest and of which her companions had no kind of knowledge.

Soon after this the carriage came for Miss Barrington, and the party dissolved as if by magic. St. Claire was the first to go after Monica, and all the rest filed out as if a general order had been given for dispersion, leaving the Anthony Barringtons alone with Miss Lester. When she went to her own room, which she did almost immediately, then they were alone with each other.

Theo was a little cross to-night. Somehow things had not gone quite as she had expected; and she was uncomfortable in consequence. She could not say what had gone wrong; but she had the bitter flavour of disappointment in her mouth, and she was both peevish and petulant. Anthony was cross too; but his little wife did not perch herself on his strong knees, nor join his broad hands together by the palms, nor call him her dear old bear, nor fatigue her eyelids by giving him a butterfly kiss to bring him back to good humour. She did none of these things. On the contrary, she yawned in his face when he spoke to her, and said irritably: 'Don't Anthony be so silly! I don't like it!' when he would have put his arm round her waist—as the process by which he thought to get rid of some of his superabundant bile.

Nothing was said that could be called a quarrel, but an acrid kind of small sparring went on between them, about irrelevant trifles for which neither cared a straw; while the name of the obnoxious young man, who was the secret sore on either side, was not mentioned in their little tourney. This is always the way. Straight-hitting is the exception and side-cuts are the rule. Once only did Anthony make a direct thrust when he said with a sneer:

'Well, Theo, I hope you are satisfied, now that you have had your apothecary friend to the house like an equal. You really

must put some curb on your fancies, Theo! I indulge you too much, and make myself ridiculous as well as you.'

'I do not see anything ridiculous in having Dr. St. Claire to dinner,' said Theodosia, pertly. 'He is a very pleasant, handsome, well-bred young man—worth twenty of your dull Edward Formbys and your vulgar Frank Meades! And if I choose I shall ask him again.'

'Theo!' said Anthony, in a warning voice.

'Well?—and what after, Theo?' she retorted.

'That is not the tone to take with me, Theodosia,' said Anthony, slowly, with grave severity and deep displeasure.

'It is the tone I mean to take when I like,' replied Theodosia, looking up into his face with a rebellious look on her own.

And Anthony felt as men do when they are defied by their wives—helpless, tongue-tied, and handfast.

## CHAPTER VII.

### UNDERSTOOD.

A FEW days after this St. Claire went up to the Dower House to pay his farewell professional visit. He had pulled the servant through her perilous attack, and now he must leave her to the beneficent care of nature and Mrs. Barrington. His heart was very heavy as he thought that this was the last time he should have the privilege of going to the house at his own hour—the last time he should be able to feel his way, and if possible make it, with Mrs. Barrington, and through her with Monica.

It was a well-nigh hopeless task altogether; but who gives up a task like this while hope has a spark of life remaining? What is a man's love worth if it cannot face obstacles? and what is his manhood worth if it cannot overcome them? And yet—is there any use in struggling with the unconquerable? in defying the inevitable? Even Thor could not overthrow Old Age nor uproot the foundations of the earth; and how then should he, St. Claire, conquer those adverse social forces, arrayed against him, which were as formidable as they were potent? Truly the stars in their courses had, as he said, fought against him all through; and none were on his side, no, not one! His profession; his want of fortune; his father's tragic end; Monica's social station; the quiet devotion and self-suppression of her character; her duties to her mother, to her family, to society; her assignment to Edward Formby—all were against him. And to oppose this hostile phalanx he had only his youth, his good looks, his love, himself!

It was an unequal struggle. Still, he would strive to the end; and at least he would not have to reproach himself for faint-heartedness.

The stars, however, were doubly adverse to-day. It had been Monica's invariable habit to be at home with her mother at that five o'clock tea to which he had been such a constant guest of late. But to-day she was absent—by accident or design? He had not seen her since the dinner-party. Had too much been said and shown then for her to dare to trust herself again? or was it her sign to him that he had gone beyond his tether, and that she wished him to understand his place? Whatever the cause, here was the result; she was absent;—and only Mrs. Barrington sat by the little oval table covered with that quaintly-worked cloth which was now associated in his mind with the one charm of his existence—with the hope and the love, the sorrow, despair and delight of his life. How he knew every line and colour of that strange border with its conventionalised flowers, its impossible dragons, its peacocks which were no more like the real thing than if they had been yew-trees clipped in outline! How it was the visible symbolism of the ideal land where he and Monica met and wandered through those unreal alleys, and sat hand in hand beneath those shadowy trees! He quite surprised Mrs. Barrington by the oddly intent way in which he, a man, looked at that embroidered border.

'He looks as if he wanted to take the pattern,' she said to herself; then aloud, an elder's impatience with unexplained oddity getting the better of her good-breeding, she asked St. Claire, What he was studying so deeply in that border? and, Surely he did not do that kind of work himself?

'No,' he answered, laughing to hide his embarrassment; 'I was only thinking how these mythic dragons and heraldic monsters ever took shape in the human mind—whether they were survivals in the historic memory of some late living pterodactyl or ichthyosaurus, or simply childish combinations, having no foundation in fact.'

'Oh, who can tell!' said Mrs. Barrington, with the faintest accent of displeasure in her voice.

Speculations of this kind were hateful to her—she thought them so closely trenching on impiety!

'No, indeed, no one can,' said St. Claire, recovering his lost ground with his usual quickness. 'As you say, Mrs. Barrington, speculations of this kind are mere waste of time.'

She smiled pleasantly.

'Yes,' she answered. 'And you are not one of those unpractical creatures who waste this most valuable possession of all we have, in dreams and theories which are more fanciful and audacious than useful or reverent.'

'I hope not,' said the young doctor, content to forswear himself if only Monica's mother would be gracious to him.

He gained his desire. Mrs. Barrington was gracious; and had he been in the modest and proper frame of mind for which she gave him credit, he would have been perfectly satisfied with things as they were. For the dear old lady took pains to show how frankly grateful she was for the care he had taken of her servant, and how frankly regretful that this was his last visit.

'I shall quite miss you at my tea-table,' she said in her sweet way. 'But you must come to see me sometimes. You know where to find me, and I shall be always glad to see you.'

He looked at her eagerly when she said this. With the illimitable folly of a lover he speculated on the chance of her words meaning more than they said—of the *I* including Monica. But he saw no trace of undercurrent of feeling or hidden meaning on her smooth, benevolent face, in the gentle condescension of her kindly manner. She meant only what she said—that she would be glad to help to keep him in virtuous paths by her mild tea and thin bread and butter; glad to minister to his soul's health, and to the maintenance of his graceful manners, by associating him with herself for half an hour at a time—sometimes but not too often; glad to put up the social buckler of her patronage between him and that low company to which she feared he might else be destined. She wished him to understand that she had approved of his conduct while he had been in her temporary service, and that she was philanthropically pleased to reward him. That was all. There was no thought of Monica in the whole matter, and he was a fool and a madman for his pains!

He could stay no longer. He had exhausted all his pretexts and had thrashed out to the last fibre all his available subjects of talk. If he would not lay himself open to suspicion, he must now take his leave without being able to say good-bye to Monica—without being able to look into her face and see where those few seemingly unimportant, but in reality significant, words had left her. His heart was heavy; his beautiful eyes, of which even dear old Mrs. Barrington felt the subtle charm, were sorrowful and pathetic as he stood up and thanked the lady for all her courtesy, her goodness, her kindness. She thanked him in return for his attention and care; and, as they shook hands together, a pleasant little interchange of friendly words passed between them—she repeating her hospitable invitation; he, assuring her that he would profit by it; and both professing mutual trust, goodwill, respect, and so much affection as the social abyss which separated them allowed or rendered possible.

Then he finally took his leave; bowed again as he was at the door; and so passed out into the hall, and from the hall down



the broad flight of steps leading from the portico to the terrace—his last visit to the Dower House paid and ended.

He stood for a moment looking at what was before him. What an interesting place it was, with its quaint rows of clipped yew-trees, its old-fashioned close-set hedges, and its long straight terraces—terrace on terrace—leading by steps down to the fountain and the fish-pond below! The peacocks sunning themselves in the broad walk and screaming from the lower branches of the formal yew-trees; the pigeons fluttering about the gabled roof, and cooing to each other, softly, unceasingly, with the pathetic yearning, the very remonstrance of love in their tones; the big brown wolf-hound lying tranquilly before the house-door, knowing whom to trust and when to guard; the beds of fragrant flowers—sweet long lines of Mary-lilies and coloured foam of odorous sweet-pea—aromatic clove-pinks and subtle-scented mignonnette set about the feet of damask roses and starry jasmine; the lazy summer sunshine lying over all, languid rather than fervid and more soothing than exciting—all added to the charm of this most delightful place, this bit of old-world beauty standing in the midst of the garish new, like a noble pearl, slightly discoloured by age, set in the midst of Palais Royal jewellery.

And the ladies themselves, with their suggestion of dried rose-leaves and odoriferous gums—they were in keeping with the house; out of the run of daily life as we have it now; something purer and more lovely, more modest and more gentle; something apart and sacred. And Monica, that crown of gracious womanhood, that flower of sweet unsullied maidenhood! Ah, how pure and beautiful she was! How well he understood now all that poets had ever written of their Beautiful Ladies, their Madonnas, their Lauras, their Beatrices, their Leonoras, their Marias! How well he knew the empire that lies in a saintly woman's life—the majesty of her faith, the nobility of her thoughts, the grand dominion of her purity! Before he came to Oakhurst he thought he had mastered some of life's most sacred secrets and had touched the chords of some of its deepest melodies. Now he knew that he had known nothing, felt nothing; that his whole world had lain in the cold and colourless twilight of the early dawn before the sun had touched the mountain tops with glory, or struck its warmth down to the roots of the forest trees, or shed its radiance on the wayside flowers. Neither of woman nor of man had he learned the deepest things; neither of life nor of death had he seen the truest meaning. His eyes had been blind, his mind obscured, until he came to where his Lady had awakened him with the living light of love. And now he knew all:—but most of all, he knew the infinite grandeur of woman, the infinite power of love, and the force of deathless sorrow.

All this was in his mind as an impression rather than as a

conscious thought, while he stood for a moment on the terrace' facing the downward lines and noting the fountain sparkling in the sun as the closing point of all.

Suddenly Monica came into view. She turned the corner of the lowest avenue, and came up the steps leading from the fish-pond and the fountain to the house, through the garden and its quaint-cut alleys. She carried her hat in her hand, and her heavy hair, which had fallen a little loose from its fastenings, drooped on her shoulders in a waving mass of tender brown which the yellow sunlight turned to gold on the edges. That sunlight fell on her face and barred the folds of the white dress she wore with lines of shining light. Of some soft clinging stuff, this dress had about it certain bands and spaces of pale green, so that the girl might be likened to a lily with its green sheath still about the base of the petals, and the face of the angel of which it was the natural expression looking out on life from the chalice. All grace, all purity, all virginal delicacy of soul and body—full of a quiet and tender melancholy which was less sadness than self-suppression—resigned, devoted, humble—making that strange land of ardent dreams her own world apart, and living in the dull monotony of cheerless fact for love's sake and duty—she was to St. Claire the very ideal of chastened maidenhood whose thoughts were brighter than her days and whose visions reached beyond experience. She was his saint, his love, his lady; and to live for her happiness or to die for her gain, would be equally his best attainment, should fate prove so far his friend as to grant him either the one or the other.

The shock of glad surprise on seeing her coming there in the sunlight so unexpectedly, after he had slain the hope of meeting her to-day and laid it in the grave of his despair, overcame all purely conventional considerations; and Armine ran hurriedly down the four flights of steps which were between them, to meet her as she ascended. By natural instinct, when he had met her he stood so that their positions were reversed. She was on the step higher than he, looking down on him and towards the fountain—he was on that lower than hers, looking up to her and the house.

'This is my last visit. I have to wish you good-bye,' he said, speaking abruptly and with some difficulty.

Her gentle face was very pale, and as he said this it became even more pallid than before; but she kept it quite still and motionless, somewhat as if she were acting a part which demanded absolute immobility of feature. Her eyes were rather darker than usual, and they did not look into St. Claire's face but over his head, and on to the fountain sparkling in the sun.

'I am sorry,' she said quietly.

Immediately after she repented that she had said only so much; for such a sudden flash of joy broke over his face—such a passionate

outburst of gratitude and delight seemed to stir his whole being—that she was both troubled and repentant.

For her path was clear; and since that dinner at the Manor she had realised her own danger as well as grieved over his mistake. Henceforth there must be no paltering with this present peril, no dallying with this seductive poison. Her duty was written in broad bold characters. She could not mistake them. And reading those letters as clearly as she did, but one course was open to her. That which might have blossomed into such a glorious flower of life and love and happiness must be nipped now while it was time and when only in the unacknowledged bud.

It was his last chance. Sooner or later he must tempt Providence and try conclusions with destiny; why not now as well as hereafter? He might not see her alone again for weeks—why not utilise what might prove the turning-point of his career? The servant was out of his hands, and he could not count on any future occasion for daily visits. He must stake his all on the hazard of the die now at once, and know his fate before leaving.

Quite suddenly, he said in the same abrupt way as before:

‘I want to have that point cleared up, Miss Barrington—I want to have it thoroughly understood. Do you think all unequal marriages, in all circumstances whatsoever, absolutely inadmissible? Could you never be brought to make one on your own account?’

‘I could never marry without my mother’s full permission,’ she said, answering the second half of his question and not the first.

‘But if your mother gave her consent, would you then?’ he asked feverishly.

‘I need not think of that—my mother never would,’ she answered, her voice a little lowered. ‘You heard what she said—and I know what she feels.’

‘And you could not be moved against her wishes?—not if you loved?’

He looked up at her, his whole soul on his face; his love pleading for him in eyes, in voice, in gesture, in all but direct word.

She turned her eyes from the fountain and looked down at him with sad and infinite tenderness; then she looked back to those shining falling waters which somehow represented to her the eternal impossibilities of her life.

‘I would never allow myself to love so as to hurt my mother,’ she answered softly, yet without faltering. ‘I owe myself to her, and no one—no one—could induce me to pain her!’

‘But the heart is not to be commanded by duty,’ he said. ‘We love independent of our will.’

‘We must control ourselves if our love wars with our duty,’ she answered. ‘We have reason, conscience, and self-restraint.’

'And if you not only sadden your own life but break another's heart?' he asked.

'I must not break my mother's,' she returned.

'And is this your real feeling? your own voluntary resolution, not forced on you by pressure from without?' he asked again.

'Yes, it is,' she said in a low, clear voice. 'My one great duty is to take care of my mother and make her happy.'

'And your lover?—the man who loves you better than his own life?' he said, his words half strangled with emotion.

Again she brought her eyes back from the fountain and turned them down to the feverish, grieving, upturned face below her.

'Hush!' she said, slightly raising her hand. 'I have no lovers—no lovers anywhere—only friends. You will remember this,' she added, bending a little nearer as she spoke, her own face full of sweetest pity—of an almost divine tenderness—so that all sorrow for herself seemed swept away in the infinite sympathy she felt for another's sorrow. 'No man must ever confess to me or to others that he loves me, and I must not acknowledge even to myself that I love him. I have only friends—nothing nearer than friends,' she repeated, a little dreamily and yet steadily.

'You have one lover faithful to the death!' said Armine, with passion. 'Come what may, I love you dearer than my life; and I shall always love you—always! No time, no change, not death itself, shall ever warp me from my allegiance to you—Monica. Ah! let me call you by your dear name once, it is only for this once! Monica, the world's soul to me—the meaning of life—the hope of heaven!'

She held out her hand, affecting not to hear him.

'I must go now,' she said. 'My mother is expecting me. Good-bye. Keep well—be happy.'

'Happy!' he said bitterly. 'I shall never be happy! How is it possible, when I have lost all I care for—all I have lived and hoped for! Happy!'

'Yes,' she answered gently; 'you will—you must—for you are reasonable and good. You are good,' she repeated; 'you will be happy. I know you will, because I wish it. Good-bye, and God bless you!'

She laid her hand in his. He carried it to his lips with that sad reverence of a love which is at once hopeless and intense. His eyes were wet, but hers were tearless and dry. The strain as well as the sorrow was on her; on him was only the sorrow. She must be strong both to deny and to bear; he had only to bear with what courage and manhood he possessed. The heaviest burden was on the woman, as it is so often!—when she must pain herself as well as the man who loves her and whom she loves, and refuse for conscience' sake that which would make her

life's happiness to grant. Poor weak loving woman—how much may be forgiven her because of her love and the burden of her sorrows!

'Good-bye,' he said in a broken voice. 'I understand you. God bless you! always, always, my one gracious Lady, the priceless treasure of my life! No one can prevent my loving you,' he went on to say passionately. 'I may not show it, even to you, and I must not ask your love in return; but thoughts and hearts are free, and to the end of time you will be the one sacred and secretly beloved woman of my inner life—my star, my beloved!'

'Hush! hush!' she said, 'you must not say these things! you must forget that you have said them. Remember! I have already forgotten,' she said simply and earnestly. 'We understand each other—but all this is forbidden.'

'Ah! what have I lost!' he exclaimed in a kind of agony. 'But at least your friendship remains to me? your friendship is mine for ever, is it not?' he repeated as if he found in that repetition some strange comfort and anchorage.

'For ever,' she answered solemnly. 'For ever. My friendship?—yes, always; we will be always friends.' She passed her hand over her forehead, and both stood for half a moment silent. Then she seemed as if she woke from a dream. 'Now good-bye, once more,' she said, looking at him steadily. 'Nothing is changed between us, and we stand just where we did. You understand all this, do you not? Nothing is changed—never has been—and we are friends as we were in the beginning. Just the same—all the same as in the beginning. Good-bye,' she repeated tenderly as she made a little movement with her hand—a movement that seemed to express both a benediction and a farewell—then turned away and went slowly up the steps towards the house, leaving St. Claire standing in the yellow summer sunshine, alone.

It was all over. He had made no way, and his doom of exile had been pronounced. For the first time he realised the full disabilities of his position and tasted the true bitterness of his social fall. He was only a country doctor, and Monica Barrington, a daughter of one of the county families, could never be his wife. His youthful theories about a man's individual worth, and the glorious application of science in the mitigation of human ills—where were they now? Standing there in the garden of the Dower House, a rejected suitor for the hand of the only woman he had ever loved, or as it seemed to him, ever could love—what good did they do him? what solace did they bring? All of which he was conscious was, that the bright bubble of his hope had burst for ever, and that he must bear his anguish in the best way he could.



'As for Monica, who could say what was in her heart as she went in to her mother, in the sweet and gracious way that was natural to her, dreamy yet loving, her perceptions not always fully aroused, but her heart ever responsive, her sense of duty ever active, her unselfishness never slackening.

'My dear,' said her mother, 'Dr. St. Claire has just been here for the last time. I am sorry you were not at home. I shall really quite miss his visits! He is a very painstaking and creditable young man, poor creature, and he has always behaved well here.'

'I met him as I was coming home, and wished him good-bye,' said Monica.

She spoke quite calmly; perhaps a little more under her breath than usual; but she had always a low voice and a soft intonation.

'That was right,' said Mrs. Barrington, looking at her fondly.

The girl was standing so that the light fell full on her face and made every line and marking clear even to the mother's dimmer vision.

'My dear child, how pale you are!' she exclaimed. 'Are you well, Monica? I have never seen you so pale!'

'Am I?' she answered, forcing a smile. 'It is nothing, dear mother. I am quite well. Perhaps the heat has touched me a little. It seemed a long way to the village to-day. It must have been the heat.'

'You should not have walked. You should have had the carriage,' said Mrs. Barrington, who had the mania of finding reasons and marking the fault.

'It is nothing,' repeated Monica. 'But I think I will go upstairs, and lie down for a little while. You will not mind my leaving you, mother? I have a little headache after all.'

She spoke in a curious staccato way, her sentences disconnected one from the other; and as she spoke she passed her hand again wearily over her forehead; as she had passed it in the garden below.

'No, my dear, certainly I shall not mind your leaving me. Go and lie down till dinner-time,' said Mrs. Barrington. 'It is evidently the heat; and a little rest will do you good.'

Monica kissed her mother, then went upstairs; but not to lie down for the sake of her headache. On the contrary, she flung herself on her couch, and turned her face to the pillows, weeping bitterly. The strain was relaxed and the reaction came, as it needs must. But through all her tears she said to herself again and again, as if she were repeating a charm: 'It will all pass, and he will marry someone else. I have done my duty and it will pass—with him, but never with me.'

When the gong sounded for dinner, and she went downstairs again, she found Theodosia already installed. Anthony was dining out, officially, and the feather-headed little wife hated solitude.

The atmosphere of the Dower House was certainly not very congenial to her, but it was better than loneliness; so she had come to bestow herself on her mother-in-law, and her mother-in-law had accepted the gift and made her welcome.

'My goodness, Monica!' she exclaimed as the girl came into the room; 'what a ghost you look! You are as white as a sheet, and you look as if you had heard some awful news. And your eyes are as red as if you had been crying. Have you been crying, Monica?' pertly.

'Theo! what an idea!' said Monica, with a forced smile.

'My dear Theodosia, what should Monica have to cry about?' asked Mrs. Barrington, seriously, looking over her spectacles as if she expected to see something strange.

'That is what I do not know, mamma; but she looks like it,' said Theodosia, still keeping her eyes fixed on her sister-in-law.

'Do I?' said Monica, rubbing her cheeks with forced playfulness. 'Are they any redder now, Theo?'

'Your eyes are no less red,' said Theodosia, with a curious air of meaning. 'I think there must be something in the weather to-day,' she continued in her light, flippant way; 'for I met Dr. St. Claire as I was coming here, and he looked as much of a ghost as you do, Monica, and as if he had been crying too. Had you been scolding him, Monica?'

Nothing was so rare to Monica as to blush. When she was most moved she usually became most pale; but now the blood rushed into her face in a rosy flood, and she answered, for her quite petulantly:

'You certainly contrive to say the most extraordinary things possible, Theo! I wonder where you get your ideas from—from nothing real I am sure!'

'From my own head—and my own eyes!' answered Theodosia sharply; her bright and glittering orbs fixed with a curiously searching as well as mocking expression on her sister.

'It is a pity, my dear, they have such a poor foundation,' said Mrs. Barrington, calmly.

'Oh, I know, mamma, you think me a perfect idiot!' said Theodosia, tossing her head. 'But I am not so silly as I look, and I see more than most people.'

'Into millstones I fancy, my dear,' returned her mother-in-law, taking her daughter's arm as they went in to dinner.

All that evening Theodosia was moody and somewhat morose; either strangely silent for her, or, when she spoke, decidedly snappish and cross. She spoke suddenly of Dr. St. Claire more than once, and looked sharply at her sister-in-law when she did so; and she said all sorts of disagreeable little things about him—now that she had heard he was going to marry Miss Flora Farley, or now that he was a most disgraceful and decided flirt. She seemed

as if she wanted to goad Monica to some kind of defence; but she prodded in vain. The sweet dreamy eyes neither flashed nor failed, and the only answer made to her vicious sallies was: 'Oh!' 'Indeed!' 'Really!' 'Do they say so?' or the like.

Still, Theodosia was not beaten off the scent, and Monica saw that she was not. But Mrs. Barrington, who understood nothing of hidden meanings, was simply weary of, and rather offended by, the censorious pertinacity of Anthony's wife; and when she went away, the dear lady said with mild sarcasm which was the utmost limit to which her cynicism could reach:

'Theodosia was in an unusual mood to-night. I do not know which is the more objectionable—her chatter and frivolity, or her ill-temper and ill-nature. Ah, my poor son! what a choice he has made!'

## CHAPTER VIII.

### THE OAKHURST INVALID.

HE had never been robust, and the life of a country doctor, which tries even the strong until well-seasoned by time and use, had evidently severely tried St. Claire. As the summer waned and the clinging chills of autumn came on, he drooped like a plant of which the roots have been cut beneath the soil. All could see that he suffered, but no one knew what ailed him; and when asked what was amiss, he invariably answered: 'Nothing,' and smiled as if his disclaimer carried conviction in its echo.

'The kind of thing that women love,' for strength he had sweetness, for fibre grace, for stoicism patience, for courage sensibility, and for the dissimilarity of sex that likeness of morale which made women call him 'so pure,' and love him because he was 'so sweet.'

They recognised in him a man after their own ideal, one who united the mysterious charm of both sexes, but in whom the moral preponderance was given to their own. Loving him personally as a man, in spiritual comradeship he was to them as one of themselves. And their estimate was just. Like a woman he made Love the end-all and be-all of life, and held ambition itself as merely Love's strongbacked servitor. And like a woman he suffered in silence, and the very quiescence of forlornness, when his dream faded into thin air and the fragrance of his hope burnt down into the dull ashes of despair. He sought no relief from the sorrow that possessed him, as another man might, in the lurid pleasures of dissipation, nor in the tougher struggle of

ambition. He neither drank nor gamed, nor yet read hard, nor wrote with purpose; and the girlhood of Oakhurst found him as impartially indifferent as he had been from the beginning. He simply suffered with the sad patience of his kind, calling to his aid his one great moral power of endurance, and taking no one into his confidence, how much soever his heart was wrung and his spirit yearned for sympathy.

Everyone of course noticed his sudden failure in health, and everyone was talking of it. He was so pale, so dispirited, so silent, so changed altogether from what he had been—and he had never been specially florid nor specially vivacious—that no one could be blind to the fact. Though only one had the right key to the mystery, all had their favourite theories, which were aired whenever two came together to ‘talk things over,’ and the young doctor’s evident ill-health was one of the topics touched on before they parted. Once some bold spirit suggested that he was in love; it was Miss Maria Crosby who set this little snowball rolling; but Mr. Chesson, the retired cheesemonger and a man of a goodly presence—Captain Farley, the weather-beaten old salt, late of the ‘Merchant Service’—and even Mr. Langhorne, the hard-featured lawyer who had a will of his own, and the way of getting that will of all his clients—they, and other fathers of marriageable daughters, laughed the idea to scorn.

‘Love!’ they said, with the disdain of men who knew the right side of leather and the colour of skim-milk; ‘do you think such a poor creature as that can love? Lord bless you! he knows no more of love than a broomstick!’

And the judgment passed current with the majority. As the young doctor had not chosen a wife from among the blooming maidenhood of Oakhurst, he had incontestably proved that he could not love.

Monica Barrington, too, had faded and become delicate almost to sickliness.

‘Lord!’ said the people with their noses in the air; ‘how much she has aged, and how awfully she has gone off!’

So she had. And yet her face had taken on itself a new kind of beauty in exchange for that which it had lost, and the spoiled complexion was redeemed by the greater lustre of the eyes and the sweeter sadness of the mouth. Her mother, however, who only saw the pallor and the fragility of form—the almost attenuation of her figure, the almost transparency of her hands—more than once wanted to send for Dr. Williamson from Staines, or even for Dr. St. Claire, if Monica thought she could trust him; or would she like to go up to London and consult some man of name and eminence? It was evident that something was not right with her, and she ought to have a doctor to learn what was wrong.

But Monica always so strenuously opposed one and all of

these proposals that Mrs. Barrington had not the heart to coerce her against her will, even for her own good.

This kind of contest may often be seen between a mother and daughter, where the girl is all obedience and prevoyance, all self-sacrifice and devotion, both in the small things of daily ordering, and the larger ones of life; but when a collision of wills does come between them, then it is the mother who yields and the daughter who triumphs. As now; when, in spite of all that Mrs. Barrington could say, Monica obstinately refused to submit her case to Dr. Williamson, Dr. St. Claire, or the eminent expert in London. So the two poor pallid, sad-eyed and sore-hearted young people looked at each other across the impassable gulf of circumstance, like ghosts doomed to wander on either side that fatal river over which no bark plies, separated for all eternity and looking, longing, sighing, in vain.

The run-down condition of Dr. St. Claire had also another inconvenience—the neighbourhood did not like it. Sick people prefer a doctor who has tone and vigour to one who is as pallid as themselves, and as limp. It does them good, on the magnetic principle, to have a large volume of life bursting like sunlight into their sick chambers, so long as that volume is not noisy, that sunlight more revivifying than irritating. Besides, the strong have most compassion. The weak are too much occupied with their own miseries to give substantial sympathy to others. Wherefore a doctor in delicate health is a mistake, and: ‘Physician, heal thyself!’ is a sarcasm which vitiates every prescription and nullifies all the good of regimen.

Thus, everything at this moment languished in poor St. Claire’s garden of life, from his enfeebled health to his diminished practice, from his broken heart to his tottering fortune.

His position was becoming untenable, and the strain was almost beyond his strength to bear. It became a matter of anxious thought with him, whether he should make one bold effort, sell the goodwill of his practice for what it would bring, and throw himself on the sea of chance; or whether he should still stay on here and do his best to conquer the love which was going near to kill him. He would have prescribed flight and change to anyone else; but had he the courage to adopt for himself the heroic remedy he would have urged on another? Could he thus give the final death-blow to that faint little hope, that melancholy pleasure of looking across the impassable gulf, which lingers like a wintry flower deep in the heart of love, even when apparently all is waste and desolation? Could he? It would be wise—but: Was it possible?

He was thinking all this one day, and he had not come to a settlement of his difficulty, when he reached Miss Maria Crosby’s door and went up the stairs to give the daily attendance for which



she paid as she paid for so much milk and bread in the day's dietary—so much floss-silk and so many flowers in the day's enjoyments.

'You are late to-day, doctor!' she said, with a certain fond reproach as he came into the room.

She was old enough to be the young fellow's mother; but that did not count. The mingling of the maternal instinct with the amatory makes a rich kind of emotional amalgam that has its charm; and elderly women in love with comparative boys are notoriously blind to the ridicule of their position.

'I have been busy,' he said, taking his accustomed seat by the couch and beginning his daily catechism.

Against his own will he spoke coldly, almost contemptuously. Though bound by professional etiquette to undertake the care of disease which did not exist, he was often impatient with this special corner of his scanty vineyard, this special slice off his small loaf. To-day he was more impatient than usual. Really ill for his own part, this travesty of sickness put on for folly and idleness, for wantonness and vanity, disgusted him in more ways than one. And, his heart full of trouble for Monica and his hopeless love—his head on fire and his spirit passing through the Valley of the Shadow—the gestures and glances of this simpering old Amanda, this daughter of a bygone generation who wanted to be his Shulamite as she had made him her Solomon, filled him with repulsion amounting to horror. Could he have rushed out of the room, as if some 'laidly worm' had been lying on the couch instead of a faded, waxen-skinned old maid who had once been pretty and who would still have been charming had she not been silly, he would have gone. But he was bound to stay for at least a few moments. Yet in all the circumstances, such as they were, was it to be wondered at if even he, the gentle, mild, and graceful Dr. Armine St. Claire, were to-day less courteous than contemptuous, less complaisant than repelling?

Miss Maria Crosby had never had cause to think that the young doctor was made of more melting material, so far as she was concerned, than the marble king in the Arabian Nights tales. But to-day he was more than usually rigid; and even the professional patience, which was part of his necessary furniture, was of a very threadbare kind as he took his place by the couch and pursued through the vague that troop of ghosts which she called her symptoms, and which he knew to be only her fancies.

Poor Miss Maria! After all she was only the whipping-boy for the occasion. It was not her folly so much as his own misfortunes which he chastised in her. This is the way of the world. That old gentleman tying his shoe—how should he not be kicked when he lies obstructive to our way and handy to our foot, at the

very moment when we are smarting with defeat and rasped sore by provocation!

Love has quick eyes; and though a woman may be a fool for being in love at all, still, whether she be wise or foolish, her heart suffers and her spirits droop when things go wrong with the beloved. The would-be Shulamite caught the uncomfortable accent of her Solomon, and met it with the ready sympathy of an affection which only wants occasion for display.

'You are not yourself to-day, dear doctor,' she said, laying her hand on his arm. 'What is amiss with you?'

'Nothing,' he answered.

'It could not be less,' returned Miss Maria. 'And you have nothing to make you anxious?' she returned; 'no bad cases on hand?'

'No; none,' he said.

'How is John Lilley at Stair?' she asked.

'Better,' he answered.

'Well, that is short!' she cried shrilly.

'Do you want me to enter into professional details? Would you understand them if I did?' he asked unpleasantly.

'Oh, come now! don't be so snappy to your best friend!' she said, with a slight laugh. 'I declare you make me feel as if you had bitten my nose off!' she added, with what she meant to be girlish playfulness—poor thing.

'I am sorry if I was uncivil,' he said coldly, rising to go.

Being either coquetted with, or gushed over, by Maria Crosby was really more than he could bear to-day. At all times a *corvée*—with that aching head of his, that fever in his veins and that pain round his heart—to-day it was unendurable!

'Why! what takes you away so soon?' she said, again laying her hand on his arm.

She stipulated for half-an-hour's consultation every day. It was in the bond; so much money for so much time; cash paid quarterly for attendance given daily. And to-day the young doctor had not been with her more than eight minutes by the watch on her little table.

'I must go,' he said, 'I am busy.'

'I thought you said you had nothing on hand!' she returned. 'Who is down? Is it Jenny Mason's boy? They say she had a bad night with him, but may be it was only his teeth and it has passed; so that need not take you away in such a hurry. If not Jenny Mason's child, and old John Lilley is getting better, who is it?' she asked curiously; for by virtue of her state, as she made it, unable to go out and garner for herself and dependent for dramatic excitement on the gravitation of news to her couch, she held herself entitled to know all that took place in the little town; and

they did say in the place that not a hen cackled but Miss Maria Crosby knew, and could tell the count of all the eggs that were laid between dawn and dusk. The mysterious activities of chronic invalidism were never more fully exemplified than in her; and let who would go short of local knowledge, she was always well supplied.

‘I really cannot go into the details of my work with you, Miss Crosby,’ answered Dr. St. Claire. ‘You must take my word for it and allow me to end my visit.’

‘Then you must give me a whole hour to-morrow to make up for this skimpy call to-day,’ said Maria, with a fond look. ‘I have not told you half what I ought, you know. I have said nothing of that nasty little pain in my chest last night—just like a knife going in at my breast-bone and out between my shoulders. It quite caught my breath, doctor, and made me wonder if it was inflammation. And this morning when I woke I had such a dull aching over my right brow!—and such a big lump in my throat, like an apple stuck there, I could scarcely swallow. I thought I was in for one of my bad days, but I got better after my rum and milk; and when I got up and had my egg and brandy I was nearly right again. Still, all these flying pains mean something, don’t they, doctor? There is something very wrong with my system altogether. I should like to give it a name!’

‘Take some sal-volatile when you feel that pain in your throat—that lump,’ said Dr. St. Claire.

‘Will that do me good?’ she asked in the silly way of people who must speak at any cost, and who would rather talk nonsense than keep silence.

‘I should scarcely have recommended it unless I thought that it would,’ he returned coldly.

‘What a way to prescribe!’ she said shrilly, again affecting girlish playfulness.

‘I know of no other way, Miss Crosby. I am sorry if my manner does not please you,’ was his uncomfortable answer.

Her silly light brown eyes, with their sparse lashes and pink lids, filled up with tears.

‘I did not mean to offend you, dear doctor,’ she said humbly. ‘I am sure you know that!’

‘No, I am sure you did not,’ he answered, his gentlehood overcoming his ill-humour. ‘Forgive me if I was rude, Miss Crosby. I am not quite myself to-day.’

‘No, you are not, poor dear! You look put out, and are really not yourself,’ was her compassionate reply. ‘And I am sure I do not mind your being short-tempered to me if it is only because you are ill and are not vexed with me. I could not bear that!’ she said with the craven fondness, the want of self-respect of the woman who loves unbidden. ‘I could put up with everything else

and never give it a second thought; but not that!' she added tenderly. 'But now tell me what has gone wrong with you,' she continued as if settling herself for a long confidential, amiable talk. 'I can keep a secret like anything if I am told not to tell; and no one is more interested in you, doctor, than I am,' she added, with a meaning smile.

His gentler humour passed as quickly as it had come. Her manners, her smile, the coaxing tones of her voice, the caressing action of her hand, the fond glance of her faded eyes, her open love-making and unconcealed admiration, were all too much for his nerves, already so sorely tried.

'I have no secrets to tell,' he said brusquely; 'and when I have, I do not tell them. If I cannot keep my own counsel, I can scarcely expect others to keep it for me.'

'But I am different from others,' said Maria, with a tender face. 'Every one does not take the interest in you, dear doctor, that I do.'

'You are very good; but I have nothing to say,' said Dr. St. Claire coldly; and at that instant the door-bell rang, and the little maid, who was waiting in the hall to see the handsome young doctor as he passed through, opened it on the instant, thus cutting short the hasty retreat which else he would have made.

'Oh, bother!' said the elegant invalid with quite robust energy. 'Who can it be? And I not half through my symptoms!'

Who indeed? In another instant she knew; for Mrs. Anthony Barrington and her sister-in-law, Monica, were ushered into the room, they among other great people in the neighbourhood making it a point of conscience to call on the Oakhurst invalid at stated times in the year. They had left the carriage a little way up the street, which accounted for their quasi-incognito while at the door. For else the livery and the bays would have betrayed them, and then neither would St. Claire have been taken by surprise, nor would Miss Maria have said 'Bother!' with so much vigour of intonation.

'Oh, so *you* are here, are you, Dr. St. Claire,' cried Theodosia, with an audacious little laugh, as if she had come upon something rather doubtful in finding the young doctor by the side of a patient.

'How do you do, Mrs. Barrington?' said Armine, ignoring the exclamation.

He turned to Monica and seemed uncertain whether to shake hands or not as he muttered rather than pronounced the prescribed formula; but Monica held out her hand in her grave, gentle way, looking as if she saw and knew nothing beyond the immediate affair of the moment:—and yet her pale face gradually changed in colour till it burnt like fire, and felt as heated as it looked. The fever-spots in St. Claire's hollow cheeks also flamed out, and the change from

pallor usual to both to this crimson inflammation did not escape the quick eyes of Theodosia nor the loving ones of Miss Maria.

'My dear Monica, how frightfully flushed you are!' said Theodosia, with malicious gaiety. 'You were so white a moment ago, and now you are like a June rose!'—laughing shrilly.

'Do you find the room too warm, Miss Barrington?' asked Maria, also surprised at that sudden flush, and looking from Monica to St. Claire, though not so suspiciously, yet as sharply as Theo herself had done.

'It is coming in from the open air,' said Monica, calmly. She could not control her blood, but she could master her voice and manner. 'But your room is not too hot, Miss Crosby,' she added, with her usual gentle courtesy.

'And how well you are looking, Dr. St. Claire,' continued Theodosia, in the same highpitched key and with the same artificial and malicious gaiety. 'You, too, look like a June rose—two June roses in October!' she cried, laughing in her falsest manner as she so audaciously bracketed these two inequalities together.

'Well, I don't know about that, Mrs. Anthony,' said Miss Maria. 'The doctor has certainly got some colour now, but he was looking peaky enough not five minutes ago, before you came in.' Here she glanced out of the corner of her eye at Monica. 'I have just been telling him he ought to take care of himself. Indeed he wants some one to take care of him—that is just it,' she added, with an hysterical kind of jocularly.

'Thank you for your kind interest, Miss Crosby; but I think I can manage for myself,' said Dr. St. Claire, coldly.

'Oh, men are poor creatures left to themselves!' returned Miss Maria. 'You had best get a wife, doctor. There are plenty in Oakhurst to choose from, I am sure.'

'That is always what I say to Dr. St. Claire,' said Theodosia, with an unpleasant laugh.

'May I ask you to be kind enough to leave me and my affairs alone, Miss Crosby?' said Dr. St. Claire, with strange and sudden sternness. 'When I want your kind advice I will ask for it; and then it will be time enough to give it.'

Theo drew herself up, her vivacious little face alight with anger, while Miss Maria's waxen skin became almost livid as she, too, bridled and resented. To be snubbed like this before these local magnates, these great ladies, whose visits counted among the highest premiums of her state—it was intolerable; and she who had always held by the young doctor, and had been his best friend from the beginning! But never again! she thought to herself; never again! He had done for himself with her, and he might go where he would now for so constant a patient and a friend as true as she had been. To be insulted before that little chatterbox of a Mrs. Anthony, who made mountains out of molehills and told all



she knew, and that queer Miss Barrington there, who was so quiet and silent that no one could be sure what she knew or what she did not know—no ! that she would not bear. So he might make up his mind to have done with her, Maria Crosby, and take the consequences. It was just thirty pounds a year out of his pocket and a good friend to the back of that!—and he with his face on fire, and Miss Barrington's to match !

If she felt this, Theo felt much the same ; for though the lightning had descended more directly on Miss Maria's head, the bolt had been intended for each alike, and the waxen-skinned old maid was once more rather the whipping-boy than the original offender. Mrs. Anthony was intensely indignant at the whole thing ; and she resolved, like Miss Crosby, to have done with Dr. St. Claire on her own account, and to make him feel by bitter experience the worse than folly that he had committed, and the good that he had lost in consequence. And she too had her own interpretation of those crimson cheeks, of which interpretation she intended to make a present to Anthony at a convenient opportunity.

'How is Miss Major?' asked Monica, in her sudden way, breaking through the embarrassed silence which followed on St. Claire's hot words, as if she had seen nothing, heard nothing, known nothing. 'Is she quite well?'

'Quite, I thank you, Miss Barrington,' said Maria, a little stiffly—very stiffly considering to whom she was speaking. 'My niece enjoys the best of health, I am happy to say ; she never knows an ache or a pain, and she cannot understand how others should be afflicted.'

'She is an excellent nurse,' said Monica, with provoking inattention to the bitter animus of Miss Crosby's words. 'Every one knows what a devoted niece she is.'

'She is well enough,' answered Maria ; 'but she is young and thoughtless, as all young people are. It takes a deal of patience to bear with the thoughtlessness and selfishness of young people, Miss Barrington,' she added, with a certain odd kind of personal application in her manner, deserved by Monica Barrington least of all the world.

'Yes,' said Monica, as if she herself had been old.

'Some people ought not to be young,' said Theo, looking full at Dr. St. Claire. 'It is a great mistake.'

'One which cures itself only too soon, Mrs. Barrington,' returned Armine, trying to smile and to speak naturally and firmly ; in both of which efforts he signally failed.

'But the process is disagreeable,' she retorted. 'And with some people, in some circumstances, there is no need why they should go through the unpleasantness. Young people forget themselves—forget their proper position and the respect they owe

to their superiors,' she added sententiously. 'Do they not, Miss Crosby?'

'Yes, indeed, too often, Mrs. Anthony,' was the invalid's reply. 'But when they do, they have to be just put back and taught better,' she added, with a vicious tightening of her lips.

St. Claire looked over to Monica. He understood the moral of the fable, and he wanted to see whether she read between the lines with him. She was looking down while Miss Crosby had pointed Theodosia's shaft; but, stirred by some subtle magnetism, she seemed to be conscious of that mute appeal, and, raising her sweet eyes, she looked quite steadily at St. Claire, then turned to her sister-in-law, and said gently:

'But none of us here are quite so young as that, Theo. We are blaming what does not exist for any of us; and surely that is waste of time!'

How weak and nervous he was to-day! These few words were almost too much for Armine. He was like an hysterical woman whom a kind word enfeebles and a caress prostrates. He felt his heart beat and his head swim till he half feared to fall; but summoning all his courage, he got up and took his leave, afraid lest he should betray himself too clearly to the unfriendly witnesses watching him so narrowly. And of what use was even that gentle covert defence of him! They were separated as far as were ever Dives and Lazarus in the Eternal Kingdom, and there was no possibility of nearer approach. So must it be! And the best thing he could do at this moment was to tear himself from the dear presence which made all his melancholy happiness, and carry safe out of the fire that secret which had caused his heart-break, and would cause his death.

Soon after this, the ladies also took their leave; Theodosia's face still alight with anger; Miss Maria's still livid with vexation; and Monica's by now restored to its ordinary pale and dreamy stillness, inscrutable, dumb, illegible.

When all had gone, and Rachel had come in to hear the diurnal report and receive the orders, which were part of the day's doings, she found her aunt in tears.

'Why, aunt Maria, what ever has happened!' she said. 'What ever are you crying for like that!'

'He was so short-tempered, so unkind to-day!' sobbed Maria. 'And before those ladies too! I would not have believed it of him!'

'If he was short I would not be so soft, if I was you, as to cry about it,' said Rachel, a little stonily, not to say contemptuously.

With her own poor little hopeless romance so well concealed that no one in the whole world suspected it, her aunt Maria's open and fluid loves were beyond her patience to bear with.

'Then you just would, if you was me. If you was me, you

would do exactly as I do,' said her aunt, cross and philosophical in a breath. 'And, Rachel, I am to have a glass of hot brandy and water—not too weak. The doctor says so,' she added. 'My nerves are all to pieces to-day. I want stringing up, and I know it.'

'You have too many glasses of hot brandy and water, and made far too strong; that is my opinion,' grumbled Rachel, below her breath, as she went to the chiffonier where her aunt's special restoratives and stimulants were kept. 'If aunt does not take care, she will get to like stimulants,' she went on, still speaking to herself. 'And she does already, far too much. A little now and then does no one any harm, but brandy here and brandy there, brandy for a headache and brandy because one feels low,—there is no sense in it! I'll give the doctor a hint that way, I just will. He orders these glasses far too often. And I will tell him so to-morrow when he comes. It seems a hard thing to say of one's aunt, but a stitch in time saves nine, and I don't want a tipsy maniac to wait on as well as an hysterical old woman like aunt is, even now.' Aloud: —'Here, aunt Maria, is your brandy and water; and, really, the way that last bottle has gone is just dreadful.'

'Then somebody has been helping themselves,' said Maria, snappishly. 'For I am sure I never drank it all!'

'Every drop,' returned Rachel solemnly.

## CHAPTER IX.

### BROKEN DOWN.

It was either the damp, ungenial day, or it was Miss Maria Crosby's 'gush,' or haply it might be the excitement and confusion of feeling caused by the painful interview with Theodosia and Monica, which gave the final blow to his tottering health. Be that as it may, when Dr. St. Claire went home that afternoon, after he had offended Mrs. Anthony Barrington and made his love-sick patient his enemy, he was so ill that he was obliged to go to bed, and the next day he was constrained to send for Dr. Williamson, of Staines, the popular consulting physician of the district. By him he was pronounced to have congestion of the lungs, as he already suspected; with complications of a grave kind to add to what was already a sufficiently grave condition.

Here, then, was the end of the first act in the sad little drama—the total break-down of the handsome, friendless, moneyless young doctor, wasted by his unhappy love to so much physical weakness as to be rendered seriously ill by the first breath of biting east wind—the first clammy chills of autumn. It was a sad

pass, into which he had fallen for the present, and the future outlook was even worse. For his chest attack, acute to-day, would be chronic to-morrow; and though he might recover now, with care, he was booked for consumption, without a hope of escape, if he did not go to some warm climate for the winter. This was his only chance—his only hope of permanent and solid recovery. So said Dr. Williamson; and so said his learned brother from London, who chanced to be down there on professional business, and who, with the ready help of his class, drove over to Oakhurst to see this poor young co-professional, making such rapid shipwreck on the rough sands of life. To tell Armine St. Claire that he must give up his practice, and go to some warm climate for the next six months, where he might live in idleness and sunshine, was like that typical recommendation of turtle soup and champagne to a Dorsetshire labourer, with six children, and thirteen shillings a week to keep them on—like the bland prescription of total rest to the journalist, who has to live at high pressure and in the centre of things, if he is to live at all. But doctors do not trouble themselves about ways and means. These are not in their province. Their business is to indicate the road which must be taken—the means of transport is your affair, and your banker's. As now,—when Dr. Williamson ordered South Italy, at first generally, and then Palermo specifically, for the young fellow who had not twenty pounds before him, and left it to chance, that fairy god-mother of men, to supply him with the funds necessary for the journey and six months' idleness.

It was just the want of these funds which made the difficulty. The practice could be managed. A good honest young fellow, who had scraped through his last examination with as little credit as could be this side of failure, and whose heart was in the bush, had agreed to take care of the patients until such time as their own lawful Esculapius should return. He would be a faithful kind of lieutenant, and there would be no fear of his turning out a usurper. He would be a warming-pan, but neither a snake nor a cuckoo; and so far he was satisfactory. But how to find the money to make this lieutenancy possible? to supply the warming-pan with coals? How indeed! Who on earth could tell!

Dr. Williamson spoke freely of the affair to all the neighbourhood—to no one more than to another, but freely to all alike. He had a kind of idea that they might get up a general subscription for this disabled healer of rickety bodies. Wherefore he detailed the case to every one in town, dwelling much on the absolute necessity there was for Dr. St. Claire to spend the winter in Palermo if he were to be saved from consumption and premature death. But—and here he always shrugged his shoulders—where was the money to come from? It was a matter of life and death to St. Claire; but if he could not raise the funds?

He spoke with unction, with sincere compassion; and he spoke, as was said, to everyone alike—to the Barringtons and the Chessons; the high and the low—always hoping, but never suggesting, that some one would propose a general subscription by which that revivifying southern sun should be rendered possible.

Edward Formby so far took fire at the idea as to write a note to St. Claire, offering to lend or to give, whichever he liked best, such a sum of money as would enable him to obey Dr. Williamson's orders. It was a bluntly-worded letter, with one or two mistakes in spelling, and without an attempt at style. A charity school-boy would not have done much worse. All the same, it was of a finer quality than many which might have been composed in classic Greek with a faultless translation into Latin hexameters. Intellect is god-like, truly; and education is the hall-mark of intellect; but nobility of feeling has its value as well as breadth of philosophic speculation; and kind-hearted, generous, somewhat illiterate Edward Formby, still with that broad strong hand of his scattering his wild oats along the highway, had a place in the hierarchy which certain of the erudite might have envied.

The offer was refused. Though his lines had fallen in evil places, and though the family Pactolus had run so miserably dry, St. Claire had not lost with his money the high spirit and independence characteristic of the English gentleman. If put to it, he would rather lose his life than owe it to polite pauperism. Wherefore he thanked the good fellow who so generously offered to be his banker; and he thanked him warmly; but always as one man with another, one equal with another—and refused to accept as a loan what he knew would be substantially a gift.

When Edward Formby read this answer, he swore a good round oath between his small square teeth—an oath of the kind which the Recording Angel blots out as soon as inscribed. But in swearing, though he cursed the young fellow's pride, he respected his independence; felt more than ever convinced that he was a gentleman of the right sort, though only a country practitioner; and was more than ever his sincere friend.

Theodosia Barrington also touched the subject of a gift of money to enable the young doctor to spend the winter in Palermo. She had still a strong interest in St. Claire; but interest of as unfriendly a kind as it had formerly been eulogistic. She talked of him as much as ever, but her talk was seasoned with gall, not sweetened with honey; and when she proposed this sum of money to her husband she spoke as if she had been speaking of a dole to a beggar. The change in her tone, however, was lost on Anthony. He was far too dense to understand these minor subtleties, and never troubled his hard brain with things which were not to be demonstrated.

'Give that young man a sum of money?' he repeated with a



short laugh. 'No, Theo, certainly not! A man must fight for himself in this world, and it is of no use to bolster up the weak. If Dr. St. Claire is worth saving, he can save himself. The fittest survive and the unfit fall through the meshes. And so it must be. I will hear of no such folly as sending him money. Let his own friends come forward. Why should we? What claim has he on us?'

'None at all,' said Theo; 'but if he has no friends?' she added, opposition leading her to justice.

'Then let him make them,' answered Anthony.

'Well, dear, I am sure *I* do not care about him!' said Theo, quickly; 'but I think it would be better for every one if he left Oakhurst for a little while. He is of no use here; and dreamy, sentimental girls may find him too interesting as he is!'

'What is that to me?' said Anthony.

He looked at his little wife as he spoke, and something in the vicious vivacity of her face struck him as strange and unusual.

'What do you mean, Theo?' he said.

'Oh, nothing!' she answered, with a little toss of her head.

'Yes, you do mean something,' he repeated slowly. 'What is it, Theo?'

'Nothing, dear, really nothing,' she said. 'I dare say I am a little goose—mamma always says I am one—but it has struck me more than once that Monica likes this young man more than she would confess if she were asked; and I am sure he likes her.'

'What confounded rubbish are you talking, Theo?' said Anthony, with profound disdain. 'If I believed you, I would thrash that fellow to within an inch of his life! Do, for Heaven's sake, have more sense, child! My sister care a button for a country doctor? Can you not find her an innamorado among the plough-boys? I do verily believe, Theo, that sometimes you take leave of your senses. You are really too childish!'

'Am I?' laughed Theo, oddly. 'Perhaps I am. But you need not be so cross, bearikins. If I am a fool, you ought to have patience with me. I did not make myself!'

'Oh, you are sharp enough,' said Anthony. 'It is only your imagination that you allow to run away with you. You are no fool, child, but you are wild.'

'Am I?' she answered; saying softly to herself: 'I have more brains and sharper eyes than all of you put together, you Barringtons!—and I can see clearly where you are all stone-blind.'

One evening Dr. St. Claire was sitting moodily by his solitary fireside. Weak, ill, dispirited, now that he was shut up within the four walls of his cheerless home, all chance of seeing Monica at an end, and the horizon of his life as circumscribed as its activities, he had but one desire—to get away. It was the well-known desire of moral sickness, finding the cause of failure in

everything but itself—in the place, the air, the food, the room, the very paper on the walls, the day's duties and the day's doings. If any or all of these could be changed, then the damaged lung would be healed, the peccant liver would be relieved, the impoverished blood would be enriched. If only he could leave Oakhurst and this dingy room hung with that bilious buff-coloured paper and carpeted with that hideous arrangement in green and red! He was sick to death of Mrs. Farley's jellies and Mrs. Chesson's chicken-broth—sick and weary of all the attentions heaped on him by the kind-hearted bourgeoisie of the place. The birds from that good fellow at Hillside were pleasant; and the grapes from the Dower House did him more good than all Dr. Williamson's prescriptions; but, save these, all other offerings, contributions, attentions—whatever they might be called—revolted and annoyed him. If only he could raise money enough to get away for that six months' change!—if only he could go!

Sick and weary, lamenting and miserable, he sat there wrapped in his landlady's shawl, with his great-coat about his knees, the very picture of masculine desolation, eating out his heart and given over to despair, when the door bell was rung sharply; and immediately after the servant brought in a letter. It had come through the post in the ordinary way and he did not recognise the handwriting. When he opened it, he found wrapped in an inner cover bank-notes to the amount of three hundred pounds. 'From a friend' was written in an unknown hand on the enclosure. It was in the same handwriting as was the address; and both were evidently feigned for the occasion.

The blood gathered round his heart, and he felt as if the days of miracles were not yet over. Who could have sent that money? It might be Edward Formby who had taken this method to insure compliance with his wish. And yet it was scarcely like him! He was kind and generous, and a good fellow all round; but this was more a woman's way of doing things than was likely with him. It had in it a spice of romance, of delicacy, of sentiment, which did not fit in with his character. He was so much more direct than this. No, it was not Edward Formby. Nor was it likely to be Mrs. Chesson, the wife of the retired cheesemonger, and the mother of little Rose; for though both father and mother had made unmistakable overtures to him in the first days, and when his sun was shining bright, they had dropped him now when he was broken and his sun was eclipsed. It might be Mrs. Goss the widowed landlady of the 'Fox and Grapes,' who was reported worth twenty thousand pounds if a farthing, and who had no children. She had made the young doctor understand that he had only to ask and have, and that if he chose to play the part of the fox, she would take care he should not find the grapes sour. It might be she. He hoped not; and he must find out. It could

not be Miss Maria Crosby. She too, like the Chessons, had dropped him in his trouble. It was not the Anthony Barringtons. Mr. Anthony would not—of that he was certain—and Mrs. Anthony could not. She had a very small dowry, and Anthony's big hand was close-fisted. The blood burnt in his face like fire, as his thoughts touched at last the central point round which they had wandered. But he put the supposition aside. It could not be from Her. He would not believe it; though, should it be, every shilling would be hallowed like the silver crown of the Madonna, like the silver offering at her shrine. But no! It was not! it was not! Nor was it from Mrs. Barrington, who, though well-off, was not rich, and, though benevolent, was not in any way lavish in her generousities. And this was a lavish gift—a lordly, royal, queenly gift. No! no!—it was not Mrs. Barrington, therefore it was not from the Dower House. It was a gift flung down from the clouds—a gift sent by the fairy godmother, unwitnessed and unsigned. He would do his best to trace it to its source; but failing the discovery of that source—and how could he ever strike it?—he must accept the money as it was sent, and use it according to its purpose.

And thus it was that, all inquiry proving in vain, the handsome young doctor left Oakhurst and England for a winter's sojourn in Palermo to heal his damaged chest if not his broken heart.

## CHAPTER X.

### IN THE SUNNY SOUTH.

THE neighbourhood which had accepted its handsome young doctor with reluctance now parted from him with regret, which soon deepened till it reached down to blame. By this time people had got used to him, and they did not like the trouble of getting used to any one else. And as all men are prone to find a moral fault in an unpleasant circumstance, the Oakhurst world, following the general law, spoke of St. Claire's touched lung as if it had been an ethical obliquity, and of his escape from fogs and east winds as if it had been flight from his creditors, or a disinclination to face the overhauling of some mud-pie of his own making.

Little cared the poor heart-broken invalid for all this frothy ebullition of ill-temper. But the less he cared the more it frothed. For nothing creates more enemies than that kind of dignified self-respect which neither asks favours nor makes advances, nor yet concessions. As some owe the lustre of their names to the diligent polishing of camaraderie, so others never get a fair hearing for want

of a herald to announce and a chorus to echo. A man must be cap in hand to the world if he wants that world to pat him on the head. Independence and having the courage of your opinions—trusting to your own integrity and the sincerity of your intentions—doing the best you know and not touting for trumpeters—standing aloof from all ‘camorras’ and neither buying the advocacy of others nor selling your own—all this raises you up as many enemies as there are influential persons who like to be entreated; and those who would have been your judicious bottle-holders, had you had a flexible spine and a glozing tongue, now pelt you with stones because you hold your head straight and forswear flunkeydom.

This, the experience of so many, was now also St. Claire’s. He had never sought to make his way other than by putting conscience into his daily life—attending faithfully to his patients, and standing free of both favouritism and gossip. He had never sought to create a party for himself, nor to establish relations with one already made. Consequently now, when he had put the neighbourhood to inconvenience and made it cross and surly, he found the disadvantages attached to isolation and received the punishment awarded to independence. He bore it all, however, with that equanimity of pride doubled with gentleness which was his characteristic; wrote his formal notes of temporary leave-taking to his patients, recommending Mr. Benjamin Hoskins as his locum-tenens in his absence; spoiled half-a-dozen good sheets of paper before accomplishing his note to Mrs. Barrington of the Dower House; and wrote a curiously composite affair to Edward Formby, of Hillside—this man who was his friend, yet destined by the fitness of things to be Monica Barrington’s husband.

Finally he got all things in train, then left Oakhurst for the sunny South and the restoration of his damaged lung; hoping that his heart would grow lighter as his air-cells grew freer, for life such as he had made it by his hopeless love for Monica was emphatically not worth living.

Though he had lived for so many years in France this was Armine’s first visit to Italy, and he yielded, as do so many of us, to the subtle charm which pervades all earth and sky there in the blessed sunshine beyond the Alps. With him as with some others Italy meant Love; and Love was Monica. All that he felt, all that he saw, was full of her. It was a kind of inverted pantheism with Love and Monica in the place of Nature and God. Wherever he went he took her with him by the way and found her waiting for him at the end. Her presence was ever about him, but more as a sensation, as an influence, than a circumstance. In the luminous skies he was conscious of her face, veiled by the filmy mists and overpowered by the refulgent sunshine, but ever there like the stars, looking down on him with the large grave love of the Divine. The soft outlines and pearly shadows of the clouds



reminded him of her hands and hair and the gracious attitudes in which she rested. The blue hills of Fiesole and the azure depths where Vallombrosa lies hidden, were like her eyes. Looking over from the Certosa he seemed to see her there, like that Spirit of whom nature is but the transparent garment. The sweet autumn air, fragrant with fruit and the ruddy breath of dying vine leaves, was redolent of her. The stars spelt out her name; in the tender glory of the dawn he saw the tremulous beauty of her smile; in the sunset the mystery of her thoughts; in the mild radiance of the moon the unsullied purity of her life. The flowers in the streets brought back the memory of that quaint garden where his happiness had been cut down to the roots with the lilies and the pansies; and the faded roses reminded him of her home. Those faded roses with their sweet and sad associations! He cherished them as one cherishes the flowers taken from the bier of the beloved, the fragrance of which for ever after brings with it the sense of death. The windows, garlanded with golden melons and crimson pomidori, were frames wherein his fancy set her sweet face as the living picture. A woman and a child praying before a shrine in the open street, suggested her. The dim light of churches and the subdued chant of the hidden monks; the sun-touched clouds of incense hanging in golden vapour about the altar and rising like incorporate prayer from earth to heaven; the ecstatic adoration of the blue-robed nuns; the simple worship of the all-believing poor; the mild face of the Madonna, type of perfected womanhood and refuge of afflicted souls; all phrases of prayer, all forms of devotion, were as words and messages from her; they called his soul to higher things, and those higher things were Monica. The dark eyes of the women and the appealing smiles of the olive-skinned children; the soft language with its lingering accent, like a caress on the mouth; the orange-gardens dropping with shining gold; the pearly green of the olive-trees suggesting a wreath for the beloved head—olive and jasmine to crown her queen among all fair ladies; the palaces which seem to have been built for homes of a statelier, nobler passion than ours; the pictures, those immortal flowers from the root of faith—all meant one thing only—Love; and Love was Monica. All his dreams, all his vague desires, all his wishes, his enjoyments, his regrets, were filled with her, surrounded by and centred in her. Italy was but another name for her—this divine Italy which means to the loving—Love. He lived as in the secret heart of that great Spirit whom some men call nature, others beauty, and whom he knew to be Monica. She was the soul of all things, and all things were her visible expression. Her presence surrounded him as a garment in which she had enwrapped him; his head was on her heart; her arms held him on her knees. He lived with her ever and ever—here in the cities and among the vineyards of this fair



Eden where Love is the lord of life—this noonday couch of the sun where dreams are more precious than actualities elsewhere.

He had come here to be healed of his damaged lung and broken heart; but the process seemed somewhat doubtful. His love had increased, not diminished, by absence and environment—can love which is real do aught else? True, it was not embittered nor was his wound inflamed; but it was more and more incorporate with his whole being—like a symphony of minor chords running through the psalm of life. He loved her!—he loved her! He loved her as a woman, sick with sad thoughts and pale with fruitless dreams, loves the man whose happiness she can never make and whose love she may never know. He loved her hopelessly, despairingly, without the power to overcome or the possibility to fulfil; with unrecognised devotion; with unrewarded fidelity; with tears which no one saw; with sacrifice which no one accepted. Her image was at once his talisman and his torture; the thought of her at once his pain and his delight.

Italy was to heal him; but surely this was not healing! To dream of Monica through the night and to be conscious of her spiritual presence through the day—to see her in the heart of Florence, in the ruins of Rome, in the burning life of Naples—to make her the goddess, standing supreme and ever young in the reconstructed temples of Pæstum—to place her as the lady, triumphant in her beauty, by the restored fountains of Pompeii—to search for her like a child in the darkness, and to spring up in the morning as if sure to find her coming to meet him through the day—to move as in a trance where her hand led him and her feet kept time and pace with his—to see all things as mere forms of her—to make all feeling subordinate to love for her—was this healing? It would not seem so. Yet his health visibly improved in spite of his sadness. He lost his cough; the pain in his side abated; his fever waned as his strength waxed; his pale face became less deathly in hue and a healthier carnation took the place of those two hectic spots on his hollow cheeks; his attenuated hands were not so transparent and his prominent knuckles became less manifest. He was evidently in better physical condition than when he had left the dear despair of Oakhurst. Italy had begun the cure which Sicily was to complete; and his grave was not yet dug.

So one fine evening he took his passage aboard the swift and sensitive little 'Galileo Galilei,' and crossed over a waveless sea to that beautiful island of Calypso, that fragrant garden of Armida, where fair and powerful Palermo lies like a pearl in the heart of the Golden Shell.

For some time the strangeness of all about him sufficed for St. Claire's amusement. There were a few people in the hotel with whom he made that kind of travelling acquaintance which may be

so pleasant and may be so tiresome: and the streets and buildings, the novelty and colour, made up the rest. He occupied his evenings in writing to Monica poetry which would never be published; in setting songs to music which would never be played; working up his sketches wherein he always placed her figure, for the delectation of no one but himself. She was ever in his mind here as in Florence, as in Rome, as in Naples. And though he knew that all this was like living on luscious poison, he preferred that poison to wholesome food; and justified his folly as the loving do.

At last he got tired of what he had in his outward life and wanted more.

The runners from Sferriacavallo; the grand old staircases and courtyards to be found in the city; the curiously painted carts with their harness and trappings glittering with glass, flashing with brass, noisy with bells and clinking metal, feathered here and hung with-fox tails there; the beauty of the children; the lovely faces of the women of the Greek colony—lovelier for their picturesque head-gear; the linen that flutters from every balcony giving the city the look of being always ‘imbandierata’ and ‘in festa;’ the bougainvillea crimsoning all the walls which look to the south where it can live in the sunshine; the summer flowers of England to be had now in the winter gardens; Monreale and the Palatine Chapel; the walks and drives; the villa Giulia and the Favorita—it was all very interesting, very lovely; but he had seen it often enough now to be satisfied, and he had no very special interest in his companions at the hotel. They were only of the usual kind; and the usual kind is not exciting.

Then he remembered the letter of introduction that he had brought with him from Edward Formby to a certain Captain Stewart of Palermo, from whom he was promised that kind of courteous hospitality which is so precious to a stranger in a foreign land.

For the matter of that, hospitality was in the Stewart blood—as well as certain other things not quite so commendable. Hospitality and large lines of living had so disastrously wasted a fine estate that, when the present proprietor came to his own, he inherited almost as many debts as rents, and for every acre had a mortgage to correspond. The whole thing was as unsubstantial as a rock that has been honeycombed by the borers, or the roof-tree of a house that has been hollowed by white ants. It was impossible for Ralph Stewart to remain at his own place, making this miserable fight with conditions as they were and appearances as they ought to be—with creditors clamouring for their dues on the one side and the family name demanding its sacrifice of gold on the other. So, letting the whole concern, he went off to Palermo as the best place he could think of for the preservation of his wife’s health, which was delicate, and the husbanding of his own resources, which were slender. Here he could live well on what

would have been comparative poverty in England; and be as much of a social personage as if he had possessed thrice his amount of revenue. The place was beautiful, the climate good; the English colony at that time was large and flourishing; the Palermitans themselves were pleasant, hospitable, kind-hearted, and fond of the English as brother islanders and the traditional freemen of Europe; and an honourable as well as an agreeable life could be made beneath the shadow of Monte Pellegrino. He could not do better, and he might do much worse. Accordingly he packed up his lares and penates, parted with his homestead, and sailed over the seas with his wife, his infant daughter Clarissa, and his pretty young sister Helen—He'en of the golden hair and credulous heart—and established himself as a permanent resident and landowner in the fruitful tract lying between Monte Cuccio and the sea.

He lived about two miles or more out of the town in a pretty villa in the Giardino Inglese—the Villa Clarissa, as it was called, in gallant commemoration of his wife and little daughter, according to the graceful Sicilian fashion. And his preservation from harm, up to this day, was one of the standing marvels of the colony. He had gone there at a time when brigands and mafiosi were assumed to hold the fee-simple of all the land in and about Palermo; when no man who valued his life, his ears, or his liberty ventured beyond a certain point in the Giardino Inglese on the one side, and of the Marina on the other: when people asked him: Was he mad to place himself so entirely out of the range of protection and civilisation? and, Was it not a tempting of Providence to thus despise all ordinary precautions and the rules observed by those who knew? when those who went for their 'villeggiatura' to the villas round about went with their armed retainers as well as their household goods, feeling that they carried their lives in their hands and that they must be prepared to stand a siege and make an effective defence if they would not incontinently lose them; when blood-curdling stories were told of this brigand chief's audacity and that brigand band's brutality—stories circulating from lip to lip, growing as they went, till the women shrieked if so much as a beetle boomed by in his heavy flight through the darkening air, and the men gathered together with pale cheeks and flashing eyes, priming their matchlocks and whispering their plans of defence, if only a mule stirred in his stall or a goat butted at the closed door; when the island was still under the heel of the Bourbons, before Naples had freed herself from her yoke or Garibaldi had come over the mountains to haul down King Bomba's flag and plant in its stead the gracious tricolour of Italia Una—Iitalia Libera!

He had gone out there at a time of general social disorder and political discontent, and every one prophesied that he would either be shot in his own vineyard or carried off to the mountains, to

arrive piecemeal to his friends unless a ruinous and impossible ransom were forthcoming.

But Ralph Stewart, sometime Captain in the Engineers, merely laughed when the croakers mapped out his doom; for all answer to their prophecies and remonstrances saying curtly: 'I am not afraid'—upheld by that odd British pride of courage as well as obtuseness of imagination, which refuses to fear and is unable to recognise danger.

As the family had not been shot, nor carried off to the mountains, nor in any other way molested by those mysterious and ubiquitous beings who were to the popular imagination what ghosts are to the timid, they were looked on with a certain respect by the rest of the community, and regarded as modern Achillides—of whom, however, the vulnerable part had not yet been found. But it was there and some day it would be touched. Brigands and mafiosi were facts, they said; and why should one man only, and he a foreigner, have the secret of immunity?

There were not wanting some who gave it as their private opinion—said below their breath—that Captain Stewart was himself a mafiose, and so far in league with the brigands who hung like a cloud on the horizon of life, in that he paid them black-mail to keep them quiet and himself safe. The want of proof did not vitiate the hypothesis. Certain folk who go to Sicily are so resolute to find brigands and the mafiosi wherever they turn, the only thing to do is to give them their heads and let them career over the fields of superstitious fancy at their will. Their belief may be no more real than those garments woven out of air with which the shivering king sought to cover his nakedness; but what of that? Belief has always been grandly independent of proof, and faith in the power of evil has ever been omnipotent with men. Let those who like it believe if they will that all Palermo is mafiose; that their best friends are mafiosi, who will sell them to the Leone of the day with no more remorse than if they were so many heads of cattle or boxes of oranges; that their physician and their guarda-porta, the police and the peasantry, the servants and the shopkeepers, the nobles themselves, and, above all, the street-coachmen, are all of this vague, all-pervading, and intangible society, and that those who deny these wide-spread ramifications are the most mafiose of all. It was what they said of Captain Stewart, because he lived two miles out of Palermo, and had not been captured, nor killed—what nine-tenths of the colony believed and said boldly, and the other tenth repeated with disclaimers of a half-hearted kind. And yet, for all the exaggeration created by superstition and terror, the mafia existed then as it exists now, and you do hold the hand of a mafiose in yours with no more consciousness of your friend's affiliation than you have of the day of his death, or of your own. And Captain Stewart cherished in his own household a member of this strange and



secret society, to whose good-will he owed more than he either suspected or perceived.

Mafiose for his own part, as some said him to be, or as free from complicity as from crime, as said others—whether owing his security to judicious payments made by dribblets to obviate the necessity of a future ransom in a lump, or protected by his own courage, and the good luck that follows on conduct—however that might be, Captain Stewart managed to live at peace with all men, and to enjoy life as much as an Englishman of active habits and broken career can enjoy it in a country where the ‘*dolce far niente*’ takes the rank of a science, and Nature herself discourages industry and discredits energy. He had a garden which was his delight, and wherein he grew every flower and shrub and tree which the soil would nourish and the ardent sun permit to live. He had an orange-garden too, whence he drew part of his income, and where he grew such fruit as was scarcely to be had elsewhere. He had a mill where he ground his own and other people’s corn, and where he made a profit on his labour when the grist-tax was imposed.

He had a clump of olives which gave him oil; a patch of ‘*fichi d’India*’ which gave him fruit for his own family and a surplus for the market: a vineyard which gave him wine—and excellent wine too; and he lived a quiet, useful, half-patriarchal life, much respected by the many, mortally feared by the few; with the whispered word ‘Mafiose’ as the echo to his name, but with open honour from all men—and from none more than from those who most affected to believe him so far an annuity to the brigands.

His own men at once loved and feared, respected and dreaded, him. For though even-tempered for the most part, as became one who thought self-control the essential element of moral manhood, he was both furious and implacable when fully roused; and those in his employ were wont to say that they venerated him as a saint and dreaded him as a devil. What they were always forced to add was that, saint or devil, placid or furious, he was ever just, and his word was to be relied on.

It was this quality of justice, this absolute trustworthiness, which gave him his hold over the men. They cheated him in little things, but were loyal to him in great matters; and his comparative obtuseness, springing as it did from the large nobleness of his nature, caused their moral respect, if it carried with it their intellectual contempt.

‘The padrone is a fool,’ they used to say among themselves; ‘but he is an angel as well.’

To which once the head man, Vincenzo, a sharp-witted fellow, answered carelessly: ‘Fools make the best angels. It is the devil who has the brains.’

Which daring speech, coupled with other things characteristic



of Vincenzo, terrified the more superstitious of the household, and got him increased influence in the place where already he had too much.

## CHAPTER XI.

### BY NATURE AND BY ADOPTION.

THE Stewart family at this time consisted of the Captain and his wife; their daughter, a little over twenty-three years of age; and a girl two years younger—just lately come to her majority—whom they called their adopted daughter and treated in all outward matters as they treated their own. They had taken her, they said, as a companion for Clarissa; as it was not well for a child to grow up without a playmate of her own age and sex, to teach her unselfishness by sharing with her the cares of the elders and the love of the world. But who this child was—who were her father and mother beyond the vague designation of ‘friends of Captain Stewart’s’—what was her real name, birth, or nationality—remained a profound mystery to everyone save Captain and Mrs. Stewart themselves. The Englishmen of the colony called her Miss Ione; the Palermitans, ‘la bella Signorina;’ Clarissa clipped her name to Nony, and Captain Stewart to Io; but his wife, to whom familiarities were an abomination savouring of democracy and barmaids, always called her Ione, with all the letters carefully pronounced. Sometimes, when she spoke of her in private to her husband, she said, ‘that poor girl,’ or ‘that unfortunate child.’

Mrs. Stewart treated this girl whom she had adopted as her own with a certain gentle but persistent coldness, which seemed like the chronic displeasure of a kind-hearted woman, without active ill-will for the one part but immovable in her prejudices for the other. She did not wish to show that she resented the child’s presence here among them, as in truth she did: nor yet did she wish to be unkind. Nor was she, according to her lights. She, like her husband, was always quite just to Ione. So much must be conceded for truth’s sake. In the girlish quarrels which necessarily arose between the two children, Mrs. Stewart was careful to keep the balance exactly even; giving the blame where it was due—if anything indeed, more inclined to blame her own than that other. But justice is not love; and Ione used to feel that she would rather have had the scolding and the love than this icy justice which ‘gave her reason,’ but denied her affection. She lived on the outside of the family life, so far as love and confidence went; and as in her childhood vaguely, so now in her

girlhood was she keenly, conscious that she was an unwelcome, albeit, it was to be supposed voluntarily, adopted member of the household. She knew that she was not Clarissa's real sister, and that Captain and Mrs. Stewart, whom she had been taught to call papa and mamma, were her parents by adoption only, not by the grace and gift of nature. Whose child she was—who were her true father and mother—was the one secret which she could not prevail on them to divulge. Nor did Clarissa know; else in all probability the confidence of their state and age would have made the secret of the one the open possession of the other.

Since she had wakened up to conscious mental life, Ione had had two great desires—that of knowing who were her parents, and that of leaving the home where she was sheltered but not cherished. She longed to know herself and to be with her own; and she longed to be free from an obligation which pressed upon her like an intolerable burden, and which she felt was as onerous to these others as to her. If she could but make her own living independent of all aid! But how? She could do nothing that would give her only the elementary '*piatto di maccherone*' a day. She was too indolent to give herself up to earnest study and really hard brain work. For all her electric force, she burnt herself out in impatient desire of, rather than in steady preparation for, the freedom she so ardently craved. She had learned nothing thoroughly and not very much even superficially. Music was the art wherein she had touched the highest level; but that highest level was a very modest altitude at the best, and she could neither have played in public nor have taught in private. For the rest she was nowhere. In matters of moral speculation—that region of thought known by the name of '*opinions*'—she put her intellect into forming judgments without knowledge. She adopted only the one side, and refused to consider the other; liking to '*think things out of herself*,' as she used to say, rather than to learn from experience or to be guided by better knowledge. It was the easiest thing to do. It gave life more colour, by reason of the normal attitude of opposition in which she held herself. It strengthened in her that sense of isolation and martyrdom by which she made herself unpleasant and the others uncomfortable; and it widened the distance already by the nature of things separating her from her pseudo family.

With this impatience with things as they were and inability to work herself clear of them, there was but small chance of her marrying. She had no marriage portion; for Clarissa's was too small to divide; and naturally in this their own came first with the father and mother who had shared all else. Ione was not much liked by the English colony; and Italians do not take kindly to dowerless wives. They adored her to a man, here in Palermo; but a portionless bride did not come into their ordering of social

life, and they could only look and long and sigh, and pass by like erotic Levites on the other side. How then could she leave this home which was her prison?—this beautiful island which was her rock of exile?—these caretakers who were not her parents and whom she counted as her gaolers? Failing the god coming down from the skies to carry her off, a second Europa, a gladder Proserpine, a more fortunate Psyche—failing the deliverer who would be to her what Perseus was to Andromeda, the consoler who would be to her what Dionysos was to Ariadne—it seemed unlikely that she would be rescued or relieved; and patience was the weary lesson set her by pain to learn.

As for the sister whom Captain Stewart had brought over with him when he first came, she had remained with them a couple of years only. The climate did not suit her, and she had left rather hurriedly. A few months after her departure the family went into mourning, for poor foolish credulous Aunt Helen was dead; and the Captain went to England to bury her. She had been but a shadow crossing the field of the Stewart history, as transacted at Palermo; but more than one thought of her with pleasure and remembered her with regret. Even to this day the image of 'la bella Elena' was in some sense a sacred memory to one to whom little in heaven or earth beside was sacred. Who that one was Ralph never knew. There were some secrets which Helen could not keep, but this she did to the day of her death. She had translated the old phrase: 'Not wisely, but too well,' to her own enduring sorrow; but at least she kept the clue close hidden, and the robber who had despoiled her was never known. Indeed, like those cunning birds which lure the seeker after their nests far away from where they lay close to his feet, Helen contrived to throw suspicion on a passing stranger, who had come and gone and vanished into darkness, the more thoroughly to divert it from that handsome and penniless young Prince whose morals were as loose as his pedigree was exalted. Penniless as he was, with an income which gave him just one room; a balcony for a few pots of flowers and his chair, whence he could survey all that passed, and be seen of all passers; enough wine and macaroni for his simple sustenance; a good coat for 'la società,' and a carriage for the evening drive—marriage for reparation was out of the question; and the weaker had to bear the burden. Helen was self-betrayed, but the Prince was both undiscovered and unsuspected; and for his own part he took care never to show the Englishman that tress of golden hair which he kept in his desk, along with some others, and labelled 'La bella Elena.' Also, as time went on, he took care not to show anything like especial interest in Ione as she grew up under his eyes, and nature revealed to him the secret which the Stewarts thought no living man divined—as indeed how should any?

But what Captain and Mrs. Stewart themselves did not even suspect, the Prince's own friends knew from end to end, and kept as religiously as if it had been a Carbonari oath, or a mafiose sign. If in Italy '*tutto si dice, tutto si sa*,' the saying holds good for Italians only. We foreigners do not participate; and our concerns are discussed, our secrets are told before our eyes, while we see no more than if we were stone-blind. As now, in this matter of Ione's parentage, of which the Stewarts knew only half the truth, and the Prince and all his friends the whole.

Among these friends was his own nephew Vincenzo; the same who, not having even his uncle's pittance, and being thus forced to work for his daily bread, had taken service under the Captain, and was now the head man of the mill, and the most trusted of all the '*impiegati*' at the Villa Clarissa.

The two Stewart girls were equally pretty, so that it was not from jealousy that the father and mother thrust Ione on the edge of the family nest and kept her on the outskirts of the family life and love. Indeed some would have said, as the Stewarts naturally thought, that Clarissa was the prettier of the two. It all depended on the individual taste and amount of artistic perception possessed by the critic, which was the more admired. But artistic perception is not a certain quantity, and taste cannot be proved like an algebraic equation; and those who upheld the supremacy of the one had always a margin left whereon to record the claims of the other. The verdict was never more than one of comparative degrees of praise, which left no more room for condemnation than for bitterness.

Both girls were fair; but this fairness was quite different in character, the one from the other. Clarissa had that kind of light brown hair which the French call '*blonde cendrée*'—perfectly smooth and glossy, and as soft as so much spun silk. It was fine, long, thick, in every way creditable hair; and to be counted as a beauty, if not indeed taking rank as a minor moral virtue. It was always carefully brushed and noticeably neat. It was obedient, well-conditioned, well-trained hair—hair with never a line broken nor a tress astray—hair which plaited to perfection, and which would have enabled the girl to have played the part of Lady Godiva had need been, when she unloosed those long thick coronals, so neatly wound about her small smooth head, and let them fall in a shining curtain almost to her feet. Everything was small and round and smooth about Clarissa. Her head was small and smooth and round; so was her forehead; so were her rose-leaf cheeks; so also was her nice little chin, like the half of an ivory ball with a cleft in the middle. She had not an angle anywhere; and she was as soft as a well-stuffed satin pincushion, or a bird with all its feathers puffed out. Her arched and somewhat indefinitely marked eyebrows were of the same shade of brown as was her

hair; so were her eyelashes—these last being rather short and thin. Her eyes were as blue as two big turquoise beads, whereof the holes or pupils were patently small. Her nose was perhaps a little too void of character, but it was a nice nose on the whole, with a good outline if a little unfinished about the small pinched nostrils, which, however, were modestly opaque, and decently impossible to dilate. The lips were like a couple of tight little cherries with the dew still glistening on the shining crimson skin; the shape of the face was round; the colour pure pink and white—like a monthly rose steeped in milk; and the figure which belonged to that face was small, round, plump, and desirable.

In character *Clarissa* was an amiable little person, with no inconvenient aspirations, no fiery passions, no unpleasant tempers, and with a great many qualities which went well in the domestic harness, where strong individuality is as difficult to manage as vice in horses. She had almost as many friends as she had acquaintances; not a few lovers; and not one enemy. The Sicilians liked and admired her, and the English had a kind of national pride in her prettiness and amiability. She was one who would never bring the national name into discredit, and who could be quoted as a meritorious example of Anglo-Saxon blood and Anglo-Saxon training. She might have been married scores of times since her sixteenth birthday, and she had wished to have been perhaps a dozen. But her parents had resolutely denied her to all natives. They were English to the back-bone; in the place but not of it; and they could not admit the idea of a son-in-law who was not English like themselves. So, as none of the marriageable men in the English colony had as yet come forward, and only Sicilians had demanded her hand, *Clarissa Stewart* was a flower still ungathered, and the fairy prince who alone would be held good enough for her had not yet appeared to claim her.

*Ione*, too, was fair; but how different was her tone from her adopted sister's well-regulated harmonies! Tall and slender, she had the supple grace of movement of a panther or a leopardess. Her red-gold hair, which looked as if the sun had got entangled in it, glistened like metal, but did not shine like silk. It fell no lower than her shoulders, and was one mass of rebellious curls and arbitrary, disobedient, unmanageable ends. No brushing could make it smooth; no fixture kept it straight; no pins confine it long within bounds. Fasten it as she would, before half an hour had passed it had set itself free from all its restraints, and had broken into a turbulent kind of aureole about her head, and into a mazy tangled curtain over her forehead, falling to her eyes. Those vagrant hairpins were veritable apples of discord in the family; and on nothing was *Mrs. Stewart* more severe than on the sheaves which she and *Clarissa* were always gathering up from the sofas and the floors.



But what eyes they were which the broad white lids concealed, and that rebellious fringe of hair overshadowed! Green in some lights; hazel shot with orange in others; sometimes angry as a stormy night, then radiant as a sunny day; sometimes with the pupil dilated so that the iris was nothing but a line of yellowish red; and sometimes shown as a mere streak of glittering colour from between the narrowed lids and long dark lashes—they were eyes which spoke as eloquently as words. But they were eyes which you could not look at steadily when they looked at you, for the strange fascination which oppressed and the subtle domination which overpowered. The brows above were thick and broad, and as straight as if ruled by a line. They were many shades darker than the hair, as were the long upturned lashes, which were like spreading flower-rays about the lids. The nose was smaller than *Clarissa's* and not so well shaped in profile; and the nostrils were open, thin, transparent, palpitating—according to *Mrs. Stewart*, almost indelicate. The lips were full and wide, but too pale for perfect beauty; and about the whole mouth was a look of cruelty, which you saw at first sight and afterwards forgot.

The complexion was a low soft cream-colour, running into the gold of the hair where this fringed the broad low brow and curled in gracious little rings about the nape of the neck; and the skin was thicker than *Clarissa's*. It had none of that rose-leaf bloom, that clear transparency, that pretty tracery of blue veins, like a finely-lined network under the fair flesh, which were such marked features with the elder girl. Neither was it skin that blushed under excitement, whether of pain or pleasure. On the contrary, it had the trick of turning pale when anything touched the heart, stirred the imagination, or woke the slightly slumbering passions of the girl whose nature was like nothing so much as that grand old mountain whose head they could see on clear days—that *Etna* with its heart of fire ever ready to break forth in active storm and desolating tempest. And that cream-white face which passion turned to deathly pallor, those dilating nostrils and those flexible pale lips, with the eyes which were apparently of all colours and as changeful in expression as in hue, were more eloquent as evidences of feeling than all *Clarissa's* crimson flushes and tearful or it might be dancing eyes, and red lips frankly pouting or as frankly laughing. The face altogether was of the most beautiful type of *Saracenic-Sicilian*; and the colour was that strange warm whiteness of one of a dark race, who has fallen by chance on amber for pearl, and on ivory for milk. It was something entirely *sui generis*, and could scarcely be classified; but it was a face which once seen could never be forgotten, and which you would either love or hate, admire or shrink from, according to your own *idiosyncrasies*.

The hands were large, white, well-shaped, with long taper

fingers, transparent nails, and a flattened, rather hard, and always burning palm. Clarissa's were round, pink, soft, small, dimpled, and always moist. Though Ione's hands were beautiful in shape, few people admired them, and no one could perhaps say why. Certainly an adept in palmistry had once said roughly: 'They are cruel!' But even Mrs. Stewart had put her disclaimer on this, though Clarissa had looked grave as if there were something in it, and Captain Stewart had glanced up sharply from beneath his eyebrows, with one of those searching looks of his which few people could bear unmoved.

Ione was one of those few. Looking first at the hand-reader, and then at her adopted father, she said, in her hardest and most defiant way:

'Yes, that is quite true. I could be as cruel as anything you like—as a tigress if you like—if I had reason to be so—if anyone wronged me or one I loved.'

'Do not give yourself a worse character than you deserve, Ione,' said Mrs. Stewart, gravely; while Clarissa added quickly: 'I believe you could be, Nony, as cruel as a tigress, as you say, if you were roused;' and Captain Stewart asked in his lazy way: 'What kind of wrong, Io?'

'Anything that interfered with my rights,' she said.

'Your rights!' said Mrs. Stewart, with weak sarcasm.

'Have I none, mamma,' asked the girl. 'Am I not like every one else? Have I no rights like the rest?'

'Who has any, Io?' asked Captain Stewart. 'Our rights are only those which we can win and hold for ourselves. They do not come by nature.'

'Yes, they do,' said Ione, doggedly. 'We all have some rights. We have the right to live and to be loved,' she added boldly; 'and the right to the constancy of those whom we love.'

'Not a very profitable subject for a girl to discuss, Ione, nor a very lady-like sentiment at any time,' said Mrs. Stewart, coldly; and the conversation dropped, after Ione had fired off, as her parting shot: 'It is not improper, mamma, because it is natural; and I do not care whether it is lady-like or not—it is true.'

Here, then, was the central point of Ione's character and the core of her discontent—her craving for that love which she held to be her right and which she knew that she did not possess; and the fiery jealousy, the arbitrary tyranny of possession, which burnt in her heart like a consuming flame.

As a last contrast, it may be said that Ione looked as if the abounding fulness of life, the all-pervading electricity that possessed her, would have made her energetic, restless, and as impatient of inactivity as she was of restraint. But in habit she was silent, inactive, indolent; while Clarissa, who had no such reserve-fund of latent force, was talkative, good-natured, mildly energetic, and

notably industrious. Without Ione's natural intelligence, she had more application; and though her thoughts were like birds with broken wings, unable to rise from the ground of everyday life, while Ione's went careering into space, bold and fearless in their flight, still the one were as those useful fowl which lay eggs and serve the family table, while the other were as eagles which keep the flocks and broods in fear, and the appearance of which is ever a signal for defence and opposition. The practical result was that Clarissa knew three things to Ione's one, and was by far the more agreeable, the more useful, and the better informed of the two.

This, then, was the family to whom Armine St. Claire, taking with him his letter of introduction from Edward Formby, set out one afternoon to leave that and his card, wondering what fortune would befall him after.

## CHAPTER XII.

### VILLA CLARISSA.

It was more like the set scene of an opera than anything of real life—prosaic, unpicturesque, humdrum, as we know it in our practical old land of coal-fires and east-winds. The broad double flight of steps, lozenge shaped, leading on the outside to the 'piano nobile;' the fountain in the court below, where the boy ever bestrode the dolphin and the dolphin ever spouted water that made rainbows in the sun; the statues in the niches; winter though it was according to the solstice, the verdure of the ever-greens, and the scent of English spring and early summer flowers, which mocked the seasons and deranged all the ordering of the zodiac; the bougainvillea flushing the walls and the Banksia roses shedding their petals over the heliotrope and mignonnette; the pigeons cooing on the roof; the peacocks screaming in the garden; the two pretty girls standing by the fountain in the sun—the taller erect, holding a canary on her finger, while the shorter, bending so as to bring her face in line with the bird, chirped and held out her hand to coax the creature to herself; the big dogs lying on the gravel; a bright-eyed, dark-skinned, bare-footed boy laughing and showing his teeth, as he watched this little drama with the familiarity of a slave whom no indulgence can lift out of his servile condition—all was so strange, so beautiful, so unlike the life of winter either in France or England, that Armine halted at the gate to look at this living picture as he might have looked at an operatic *mise en scène*, loath to ring the bell which was to give him ingress and bring him back to real life.

How beautiful those two girls were, each in her own way; yet how unlike was the one from the other! That tall, slender, graceful creature was dressed like a sixteenth-century picture—her colours old-gold and green. The shorter was of more correct modern intention, but her rather hard blue gown looked like a copy of metropolitan fashions made by a local milliner who had more confidence in her ideas than diffidence in her method. And Armine, as became the woman-worshipper he was, had keen eyes for all the details of feminine adornment and attire. A high frill about her throat, slashed sleeves, and a girdle round her waist, made that tall girl like a memory rather than a present fact; and something in her face seemed to take her back to the ages of long-ago, as if she had been Catherine de Medicis before she had felt her power and learned to sin, or Lucrezia Borgia with her fair hair glistening in the sun, and the dread qualities of that Aqua Tofana as yet unproved. But her companion, all over little ‘kilt-ings’ and superfluous bows of ribbons, was emphatically of the present day—as far removed from crime as from poetry, from tragedy as from heroism.

Armine watched them for a few seconds, and saw, with a certain odd satisfaction, that the bird did not leave the hand of the one for all the invitation of the other. It fluttered its golden wings and chirped back its cheery note of refusal; then finally flew up to the shoulder of the one who seemed to be its mistress, as if to end by a decisive protest a scene of unwelcome temptation.

‘You little darling!’ said the girl in a caressing voice, taking the bird off her shoulder and pressing it against her face with fondness. Then a fierce light blazed up into her eyes as she said in a curiously harsh voice: ‘But I would have killed you if you had left me!’

‘For shame, Nony! you jealous, passionate, cruel thing!’ said the shorter girl with temper.

On which St. Claire rang the bell, and a shuffling old woman, whom he had not seen crouching on the ground inside the gate, slowly raised herself, like an animated bundle of rags, and drew the bolt to let him pass.

As he entered, she furtively crossed herself and spat on the ground. This stranger, with his soft, dark, melancholy eyes, pale face and clear-cut handsome features—so like the pictures of the Christ in all but the traditional colouring, that even old Concetta saw the resemblance—he was only a heretic like the rest, and one whose baleful influence had to be exorcised by the divine grace of holy saints in heaven.

Both girls turned to look at the visitor; and then Clarissa ran into the house to warn her mother, as girls of a certain stamp always do. But Ione stood her ground, looking at the new-comer from under her dropped lids while seeming to be apparently occu-

pied only with her bird. As he came nearer she raised her head and opened her eyes on him with a sudden, swift, and almost dazzling flash, which made him feel as if he had been lightly struck across his eyes.

Standing there like some fearless creature of the woods and wilds at gaze, nothing on earth could have been more unlike Monica Barrington than was this slender girl, with her flashing eyes and panther-like grace, her strange commingling of Eastern modelling with Western colouring, her look of lightly slumbering and easily awakened passion, of desperate resolve when roused, of jealous tenacity when won. But to those who are in love everything is like the beloved. Art is the symbol, nature the garment; all charm has the same savour, all beauty bears the same impress; life and eternity are interpenetrated with the one thought, the one spirit, and love transforms to itself every circumstance and every association.

Something, he knew not what, in the pose, the lines of the girl before him, perhaps in the colour of her gown, perhaps in the way in which she held her head, her hand—something, no matter what—reminded Armine of Monica; and that sweet dreamy face, as he saw it when they had met in the garden and understood each other only too plainly, seemed to look at him through Ione's, like a spirit faintly outlined in the moonlight, or like that moon itself when hanging like a cloud in the daylight sky. This strange mixture of the East and West—this woman with her panther-like grace and flashing eyes, who involuntarily suggested Lucrezia Borgia and Catherine de Medicis—also reminded him of that mild and tender lily-lady, with whom dreams stood for realities and regret was the strongest form of passion.

Love parts with no fantasies. Once created, they remain till they crystallize by repetition. No one on the outside ever knows how much a sudden and apparently inexplicable liking for one is due to this kind of vague resemblance to another. For after we have gone through our first youth, when alone our emotions are new and fresh, life ceases to be original, and love itself is more often repetition, remembrance, suggestion, than deliberate choice of irresistible sympathy.

Her eyes, still wide open, with that strange electric light within them as they looked into his—soft, tender, humid, loving, because full of the thought of Monica—Ione took two steps to meet St. Claire, as he, still shaken by his strange confusion of perception and remembrance, went slowly forward to where she stood.

‘Do you want papa?—Captain Stewart?’ she asked in English.

Her voice was penetrating and vibrating, but neither musical nor sympathetic.

‘I came to leave my card and a letter of introduction,’ said Armine, with a slight smile.



The abrupt directness of her address, at once so graceful and so unconventional, roused him from himself and interested him.

‘What letter?’ she asked.

‘From a friend of his and mine—Edward Formby,’ he answered.

‘Then you had better come into the house,’ said Ione. ‘It will give papa less trouble than if you leave your card and he has to go into Palermo to find you out, as people generally do. Come with me.’

‘Thank you,’ said St. Claire, with pleasure.

At this moment a swarthy, Moorish, almost negroid-looking man, with glittering eyes, a flat nose, protruding jaw and high cheek-bones, passed with a lounging kind of step under the arcade formed by the double flight of steps. He came apparently from nowhere, rounding the angle of the house like a shadow, as dark and as noiseless. He was not barefooted, like the boy, but his shoes were of some soft material which deadened the sound of his footsteps so that he made no more noise than a cat creeping by the wall.

‘Vincenzo! where is papa?’ asked Ione, in Sicilian.

‘At the mill, Signorina,’ he answered, uncovering his head and showing a shock of curly twisted hair, of the same quality as her own, but dead-black where hers was living gold.

‘Ask him to come to the house,’ said Ione. ‘An English gentleman has a letter from a friend, and wants to see him.’

She spoke in a curt abrupt way, without the faintest pretence of courtesy; but the man was respectful to servility, and smiled as if the very insolence of her bearing conferred on him favour and honour. All the same, his eyes were bold, and seemed to take her in too completely for a servant—to express too much admiration—to confess her womanhood too openly—in view of the different positions in which they stood and the respect due from him and owing to her. So at least it seemed to St. Claire. But then he did not understand Italian eyes; and Ione, who was evidently haughty enough for a young queen, did not seem to see what he saw, and certainly not to resent what half-annoyed him.

‘Come up to the drawing-room,’ she then said to Armine. ‘You can see mamma till papa comes from the mill.’

‘Thank you,’ repeated St. Claire, thinking the whole affair somewhat of an adventure and more than pleasant. His fancy and imagination both were excited, and the gentle kind of artistry, which was one of his characteristics, had food enough in the girl, the scene, the circumstances—all of which were so novel and so beautiful, so stimulating and so suggestive.

He followed Ione up the wide double flight of steps into a lofty hall, with frescoed walls, painted ceiling, and smooth blue shining tiles for the marbled paper, uneventful whitewash, and moss-patterned carpets of home; through several rooms of unspecified

character; and so to the last of all—a pretty drawing-room, filled with flowers and pictures, English books and English ornaments, and yet for all these national addenda, not like an English room of native growth.

It was less luxurious and more brightly coloured; less complete in its conditions and more scattered in its arrangement; evidently more adapted as a refuge from the heat of the day than as a comfortable retreat in the long dark winter evenings. And such home circumstances as were retained had somehow a transplanted look, as if out of place, and not in harmony with the true genius loci. Still, it was more home-like than the hotel.

Here sat Mrs. Stewart, a fair, plump, not to say obese, little woman, like Clarissa grown older, with tints of blue and yellow for the pure overlay of milk and roses, and fully completed circles for the younger woman's slighter curves. But, unlike Clarissa, a discontented expression was stereotyped on her round face, as if she were one who had been hardly dealt with by fate and who could not forget her griefs. It might be that she was unhappy because she was in delicate health; because her husband had been obliged to leave his place and all the social consideration that went with it; because she had had no son to inherit; or because she was discontented with her servants. *Chi lo sa?* Whatever the cause, the result was undeniable; she was evidently a woman with a grievance, who pitied herself and protested, impotent to prevent.

But she was gentle if fretful, and especially kind to those of her compatriots who brought letters of introduction from England. She had never really taken to the Sicilians; and her hospitality to her own was partly because of her want of affection for those who were not her own.

Such as she was, she received Dr. St. Claire with cordiality, and expressed her pleasure at seeing a friend of her husband's friend, Edward Formby; whom, however, she knew only by name, and of whom she asked innumerable questions, after the manner of those to whom personal details are the most interesting things in life. She had a trick of sighing and casting up her eyes when she spoke, which was not conducive to cheerfulness; and she had always that queer self-pitying air which has been noted above. The contrast between her exuberance of physical outline and persistent melancholy of manner was almost comical from its incongruity and misfitting oddity, and the first questions which every one asked about Mrs. Stewart were: What is the matter with her? and, Why is she so unhappy?

Presently Captain Stewart came in. A tall, lean, angular man, with a quiet manner, a slow utterance, a monotonous voice, speaking little, generally resting in sloping, lazy attitudes, on slight acquaintance he might have passed for indolent and apathetic;

deeper knowledge revealed the dogged determination, inexhaustible energy, and that quiet courage of the practical and unimaginative nature which knows no fear and acknowledges no danger, by which he had made his way and held it in Palermo during the most lawless and disturbed times. The backbone of his character was respect for himself, his caste, his country, his religion, branching out into illimitable contempt for all foreigners of every nationality, and for all people of lower social grade than his own.

He was a man to whom those in his employ were always 'those fellows,' and sometimes 'these ruffians of mine.' But he did his duty by them for all that he looked on them as little better than our ancestral savages, or our poor relations the apes. He gave them hard words and good wages, and spent his strength in trying, as he said, to hammer some kind of principle into them by rebuke, exhortation, scorn, and honesty for his own part. He said it was heartless work, and that he knew any one of them—even Vincenzo—would buy and sell him before his eyes for sixpence; yes, even Vincenzo, the overseer at the mill, and the deepest of all in his confidence and respect.

It is but fair to add that Captain Stewart would have said the same of any working-men, English or other. It was not only because they were foreigners that he despised them, but because they were his social inferiors; though certainly, being foreigners did add a finer flavour to his disdain and made him ascribe to nationality much that was due to human nature. For his patriotism was of that robustly ideal kind which consists in calling every kind of trickiness and vice 'un-English;' so that, to be English was, according to him, to possess all the virtues in a lump while alien to all the vices—to be one of a nation where every man is honest, brave, pure-hearted, and true, and every woman unselfish, tender, domestic, and chaste.

If this was his state of mind with respect to his servants and workmen, he was no more liberal to the gentry. For it was part of his very constitution to believe that no man out of England understood more than the first rudiments of refinement or morality; and, seeing that he held all differences as evidences of our superiority and the inferiority of those others, the balance was never in want of a weight and the register had always some deficiency to record.

'Glad to see you,' he said to St. Claire, as he came into the room with that long slow stride which on a mountain-side we call 'slogging.' 'Glad to see any friend of Formby's,' he added, glancing at the letter which Armine had sent him by Vincenzo, and which he held open in his hand. 'How long have you been here? and how long do you stay?' he continued, subsiding into a chair where he sat all askew, with his long legs thrust out in two straight parallel lines, like a flying stork's.

'I have been here about three weeks, and I stay till April,' answered Armine.

'And then make the giro?'

'Yes; then I go round the island.'

'The usual thing!' said Captain Stewart, with a satirical smile. 'All you tourist fellows do the same thing—like mill horses.'

He forgot the time when he had been a tourist fellow himself and had gone the round like the rest. But then that was in the old days, when visitors to Sicily were scarce; and our own experience is always respectable, where that of others is ridiculous.

'I suppose we do. We all have naturally the same wish to see Girgenti and Syracuse; and as the circumstances are invariable and the places immovable, we must follow in each other's footsteps,' answered Armine, with simplicity of self-defence, not meaning a snub.

Ione lifted her eyelids and half-smiled as she glanced rapidly at the new-comer. She was the only one who caught the snub; but then she was the only one on the look-out for stings, and undutifully rejoiced when they came.

'And what have you done since you came?' continued Captain Stewart. 'Seen the chapel, of course, and Monreale?'

'Yes; I have pretty well done the city and environs,' said Armine, falling into the trick of tongue common to sightseers.

'And now you are tired of stones and want society, eh?'

'I suppose so,' said St. Claire, smiling.

'I see you look peaky, and Formby says you have broken down,' said Captain Stewart, again referring to his letter as to a brief. 'The air here will set you to rights in no time, and we will pull you straight if you go wrong.'

'Thank you,' said Armine, looking at Mrs. Stewart.

'How do you like Palermo, Dr. St. Claire?' asked that lady with a sigh.

'Greatly,' he answered.

She looked at him with a plaintive smile to match her husband's satirical one; Clarissa turned on him a beaming face, as if he had advocated her cause; and Ione again raised her strange eyes with that sudden flash which dazzled and bewildered him, and seemed like a light blow across his own eyes.

'It is a pretty place—for a short time,' said Mrs. Stewart, in the tone of one making a generous concession.

'Terribly behind-hand and dead-alive,' put in her husband.

'The scenery is beautiful, and some of the architecture is very fine,' said Armine.

'Which don't make up for the want of energy, honesty, and progress,' drawled the Captain.

'You have been here for many years, have you not?' asked St. Claire.

Mrs. Stewart looked forlorn and oppressed.

'Ah, yes!' she said, in the tone of a German who murmurs 'Ach Himmel!'

'Worse luck, yes,' said Captain Stewart, shrugging his shoulders, but speaking with philosophic cheerfulness.

'Poor dear Palermo, I am sure it is very nice!' said Clarissa, affectionately.

'England is nicer,' said Ione, abruptly.

'My dear child, how do you know?' asked Mrs. Stewart with melancholy remonstrance. 'You have never been in England—how can you form any opinion of its merits?'

'I know it is,' answered Ione, tenaciously.

'Io is about right for once,' said Captain Stewart; and St. Claire smiled his assent.

'Yes,' he said: 'if we have not the beautiful skies and flowers of Sicily, we have some other things which are perhaps more valuable and more essential to the well-being of a nation.'

'Of course we have!' said Ione triumphantly, identifying herself with the cradle wherein she had never laid her curly head.

'Just so,' said Captain Stewart, approvingly, accustomed for his own part to these common-places. 'That is where the whole thing lies.'

'Yes,' sighed Mrs. Stewart; and 'Yes' repeated St. Claire for chorus.

'But the climate,' objected Clarissa, with a little shudder. 'There is no sun in England, and it is always raining.'

'Oh! the climate is absurdly exaggerated,' said Captain Stewart. 'Take the good with the bad, all round, there are many worse climates than that of Old England.'

'There are more days in a year when a man can be out of doors without inconvenience—more hours in the week when he can work—than in any other country in Europe,' said St. Claire.

'It is a grand country, and it is free!' exclaimed Ione, with sudden enthusiasm.

'My dear child, how can you possibly know?' returned Mrs. Stewart, again reproving.

'I do know,' answered Ione, as she had answered before.

'Perhaps it is too free,' said Clarissa, with a little laugh.

'That is impossible,' said Ione.

'No, Ione, that is very possible. And England does give too much freedom to young women,' said Mrs. Stewart, in the tone of one touching a well-worn theme and quartering beaten ground.

'Does it, Dr. St. Claire?' asked Ione, turning to Armine with a half-pathetic look of appeal.

'Not too much, because they do not make a bad use of it, else perhaps it would,' temporised the handsome young doctor, looking



first at Mrs. Stewart and then at the girl with a sweet little half-encouraging, half-deprecating smile for each.

And again their eyes met—his tender, humid, soft, pleading; hers mysterious, magnetic, passionate, bewildering—eyes which were not part of her personality but were the whole—eyes which, when you looked at them, made you forget all but what you saw, and which, when they looked at you, made you feel that you possessed the rest.

And for the second time something, he did not know what, in Ione, reminded St. Claire of Monica, and the suggestion seemed to bring her as close to him as if she had been the sister of the one he loved.

After this the conversation drifted naturally on to the things of Palermo; what he had seen and what he had not seen; what he admired, and how much he understood of the language, the habits, the architecture, the history; with the not very consoling inference to be drawn from these questions and his answers, that he had seen nothing in the best way; that he understood nothing in the true light; and that if he wanted to make good use of his time he must put himself under Stewartian guidance, and they would direct him aright. And then this first interview ended with an invitation to come and lunch here to-morrow, when they would arrange some excursion which should be at once profitable and pleasant.

It was all very charming, very cheering, very strange. English in feeling, Palermitan in surroundings, the Stewarts had that odd kind of double nationality which interests the new-comer so much;—reducing the social chaos in which he finds himself to some kind of intelligible order—giving a key to all the mysteries, and making an oasis of familiarity in the desert of the unknown.

Yes, indeed, it was all very charming; and St. Claire, who had so many effeminate characteristics, felt the same kind of gratitude as is felt by the average woman when, desolate and alone, she suddenly lights on a compatriot who makes himself her protector, and henceforth feels herself championed and cared for. He was glad to have made this pleasant acquaintance. Palermo would now wear another and more friendly aspect to him, and the cure which it was to effect would be more certain and more complete.

As he drove along the upper road of La Favorita, conscious of the aromatic scents of the wild worts and the beauty of the flowers and evergreens, he was surprised to note how much lighter and less depressed he felt than usual. The dead weight of loneliness was lifted from his heart, and these good dear people had opened for him a temporary home. It would give him so much pleasure to cultivate their acquaintance! Already he liked them all, seeing each in his or her ideal. But naturally the two girls interested him most; and of the two Ione was the more suggestive.

She was evidently a psychological study, and she was of resplendent beauty. Why and how did she suggest Monica Barrington? Not a line of likeness really existed; and Armine did not yet see that the likeness was only in his own imagination and due simply to the fact of the all-pervading influence of memory. Still it was there, vivid enough if self-made and baseless; and because of it Ione Stewart possessed a double charm—her own and Monica's.

'A day to mark in white chalk,' he said to himself as he drove up to the hotel. 'And, what a strange coincidence!—it is my birthday,' he added, looking to the sky just as the sun sunk down behind the noble barrier of Monte Cuccio to the west.

### CHAPTER XIII.

#### 'WHAT THEY INFLICT THEY FEEL.'

THE next day at the appointed hour Armine St. Claire found himself at the Villa Clarissa; that strange charm of English life in a foreign setting as keen to-day as it was yesterday, and the fascination of the whole thing as strong. And, as yesterday, he found the two girls in the court by the fountain, again with the bird between them. But this time the spirit of the scene was changed, though the framework and the actors were the same.

Clarissa, her body curved a little forward and her hands held out as if to repel her sister, stood with a flushed face, weeping violently, speaking passionately and evidently with bitter reproaches; while Ione, concentrated and deadly pale, her head bent, but her flashing eyes raised from beneath their level brows with a look of defiance and pain united, stood silent and superb, as one who has gained a victory, but at cost. Still, having gained it, she could afford to let the vanquished rave.

In her hand lay the little canary, dead—two or three drops of crimson blood staining the ruffled gold of his feathers.

'Oh, Dr. St. Claire, think what she has done—she has killed poor Mimi!' cried Clarissa, as the young doctor came through the gate.

'Killed the bird—what a pity! what a misfortune!' said St. Claire. 'How did it happen?' he added, with a kind of professional interest in death as a familiar and personal circumstance which at once made him part of the affair. 'How was it?' he repeated, holding out his hand for the bird—which Ione did not give him.

'She did it on purpose!' sobbed Clarissa, between grief and rage torn out of all conventional bondage and casting good-breeding

and politic reticence to the winds. 'She did it for jealousy, because it came to me when I called it.'

'Oh no, not on purpose!' said St. Claire, in his sweet temporising way.

To a man of his gentle nature such an outburst was both abhorrent and unintelligible; and that this beautiful girl, who in the mysterious way of all-pervading love suggested Monica, should have done such a savage thing as to kill a favourite bird for jealousy of her sister, was a thing he could neither accept nor understand. It could not have been done on purpose! He was sure that she could explain away a fact which looked so black against her, and that her action would prove to be rather a misfortune, because unintentional, than a crime, because deliberate.

'On purpose!' repeated Clarissa, emphatically. 'On purpose; for jealousy because it came to me when I called it. She cannot deny it.'

'I have no wish to deny it,' said Ione proudly. 'It was my bird, and it should not have left me for anyone else. It was mine. I had the right to it.—I had the right to kill it if it deserted me. It was faithless; and I did kill it.'

'I am very very sorry, and I do not see your right,' said Dr. St. Claire, gravely.

She looked at him with reproach; her blazing eyes full of passionate contempt for his tame-spirited want of sympathy. Had he been a true man, she thought in her revolt, he would have understood her feeling, and would have honoured her for the assertion of her rights.

'But it was mine,' she repeated, with the monotony of those who have only feeling on which to argue and who cannot bring forward reasons. 'It had no right to leave me for Clarissa. It belonged to me, and I loved it; and I was justified in killing it if it no longer loved me.'

'No, you had no right over it, and you were not justified, Miss Stewart,' said Armine, with more firmness than might have been expected from him, considering the man he was and the girl with whom he was dealing.

'Love gives no rights?' asked Ione, with supreme contempt. 'Oh! you are a cold-blooded northerner, else you could not have said that!'

'I am neither a northerner nor cold-blooded,' said Armine, gently. 'And love does not give the right of life and death.'

'Not for infidelity?'

'Not even for infidelity,' he answered.

'What nonsense you talk, Ione!' said Clarissa, with the scornful accent of common sense in the midst of hysterical exaggeration.

'Infidelity!—because a little bird came to another person when it

was called! One would think you were speaking of men and women—husbands and wives.'

'It is all the same thing,' said Ione. 'It is the love, not the person. My bird was mine, and it should not have gone to you. And you are the murderess,' she said, fiercely turning against Clarissa, as if she would have struck her to the earth. 'It is you, with your horrid cold-blooded love of teasing, who are to blame, not me. You were the cause of it all; you are to blame!'

'No, no, Miss Stewart,' said Dr. St. Claire; 'you go too far there.'

'It is what she always does,' said Clarissa, weeping.

'Oh, come now, don't!' said St. Claire, sincerely distressed. 'Your sister did not mean what she said—she could not mean it,' he said soothingly to Clarissa. 'You did not mean it, did you?' coaxingly to Ione.

'Yes, I did,' said Ione, stubbornly.

'Oh!' was the young doctor's exclamation, made in a tone of disappointment.

'You don't know Nony yet,' said Clarissa, with energy.

'I am sure I know her too well for that,' returned Dr. St. Claire, in his sweetest and most winning way.

Ione looked at him, and some of the darker passion went out of her face.

'You are angry with me?' she asked suddenly, with a shade more of softness, or rather a shade less of fierceness, in her eyes than had been there before.

'Angry? My dear Miss Stewart, it is not my business to be angry with you whatever you may do!' he said with a slight smile.

'But you are, whether it is your business or not,' she answered.

'I am sorry,' was his rejoinder.

'Which is the same thing under a different name—the pill sugared,' returned Ione, bitterly.

'Anyone would be sorry and angry too, Nony, who was not such a monster of cruelty and jealousy as you are,' said Clarissa vehemently. 'You are not fit for civilised life—you are nothing but a savage!' she added.

'No, no, no! neither a savage nor a monster, Miss Stewart,' said Armine, trying to speak lightly. 'But I am sorry she is so jealous—and very sorry the poor little bird is dead.'

'He should not have left me for Clarissa,' said Ione sullenly.

Dr. St. Claire shook his head.

'It was a small offence for which to cut short its happy life,' he said gravely.

For a moment Ione's eyes flashed with impatient pride, like a sneer and a reproach flung into the young doctor's face; then they fell suddenly to the ground, while a strange and nameless

something stole softly over her own. It was strange and nameless even to Clarissa, who knew the varied lights and shadows of that expressive countenance so well; for, with all its swift changes, it rarely showed tenderness, remorse, or shame—and it was tender, remorseful, and ashamed now.

'I am sorry my bird is dead; and that I can never love it again,' she said softly, a faint quiver passing over her lips.

Then the gentler mood passed as quickly as it had come, and she raised her eyes again full of defiance into St. Claire's, while she stiffened her neck till it became like a column of stubbornness and pride.

'But he was mine; and it was a crime for him to leave me for anyone else—to love anyone but me. And I had the right to kill him if he did. And I did kill him,' she said, setting her lips into a thin line and breathing hard through her palpitating nostrils.

'You are a cruel, wicked, jealous girl, and you will never come to any good,' said Clarissa, for her final fling, as they heard the voice of Captain Stewart coming through the garden, summoned by that marvellous telegraphy of looks and signs by which southern Italians are told all they wish to know and tell all they wish to have known. 'And I will tell both father and mother what you have done,' she added; 'and then you will see what they will say.'

'I do not care what they say,' said Ione, with stubborn pride. 'It was your fault for enticing my bird from me. He was mine and he ought not to have left me. If it happened again I would do the same—I would kill him,' she added in her hardest, most tenacious, most desperate manner.

At this moment Captain Stewart rounded the corner of the house; Mrs. Stewart came down the outside steps; and the conversation passed from the bird to St. Claire—How he found himself to-day? What had he done this morning? Was not Pellegrino looking magnificent? Had he ever seen the sea so enchanting? and, Was not the day absolutely perfect?

But on this Mrs. Stewart said, with the plaintive discontent of one ever on the look-out for flaws and seamy sides—one who has outlived all illusions:

'No, not quite perfect, Ralph; there is a point of scirocco in it.'

After these necessary preliminaries had been gone through, Clarissa broke out with the story of her sister's iniquity; and, for all the presence of the stranger-guest, Ione was severely scolded by Mrs. Stewart, and sermonised with more effect but in fewer words by her adopted father. Yet St. Claire, in spite of his constitutional dislike to think ill of others, could not help feeling that Clarissa told the news rather to get Ione into disgrace than for righteous indignation at the wrong itself. It was a stone put into her hand by Ione against herself, and it was only too easy to



adjust the sling. Accordingly it was adjusted, and the blow was delivered with telling force.

The severest thing, however, that was said or done was when Captain Stewart, taking the girl's burning hand and forcibly opening it, flicked with his forefinger a drop of blood that had come on the palm from the bleeding bird.

'Eh?' he said, drily. 'That hand-reading fellow said it was cruel. He did not go quite so far as to say it would commit murder.'

'And would again,' said Ione, defiantly.

Vincenzo, the swarthy Saracenic-looking head of the mill, was standing by Captain Stewart, just that one step in the rear which marked his inferior position—standing bare-headed in the sun, no one bidding him be covered, till Ione suddenly ordered him to put on his hat, as a sign of grace to him which meant rebuke to the rest. St. Claire, preoccupied and disturbed, had forgotten to return his salute, and, after Ione's abrupt command, the man stood there with no more attention paid to his presence than if he had been a slave or an animal. With the quickness of his race, however, he seemed to have understood all that had taken place; and, with the ready sympathy which accompanies that quickness, to have identified himself with the matter on hand, though he himself was of no account in it.

In a clear, unembarrassed voice, but with almost servile devotion of manner, he said to Ione, as if it were a solatium that he was offering :

'I will make a little coffin for your bird, Signorina, and we will bury him among the flowers.'

Captain Stewart looked at the man sharply, but Mrs. Stewart said, with a kindly smile, addressing St. Claire, while glancing at Vincenzo :

'He is such a good fellow, this Vincenzo ! He always brings us flowers on Sunday, because he knows that Sunday is a holy day with us—not a mere festa, as with them, poor wretches !—and he wishes to honour it for our sakes. We have a fairly well-managed garden, as you see ; though I must say I do not think it is equal to its cost—seeing what we spend on it, it ought to be a thousand times better,' she put in, parenthetically, with her usual accent of displeased discontent ; 'but Vincenzo manages to get flowers far superior to any that we have. I do not know where he goes for them ; and he ought to tell us, but he will not ; which is very wrong of him. Still, it is nice of him to bring them to us as he does. It is a graceful little attention, and shows that he appreciates all that we have done for him. For without us he would have starved in the streets,' she added, with that curious acrimony sometimes seen in generous people, when recounting their good deeds, and half-angry with those whom they have served.

All this time Vincenzo stood with a smiling face, bright, swarthy, glittering, looking from Mrs. Stewart to Dr. St. Claire, and from them to the others, in that unfocussed way of ignorant participation proper to a sympathetic man, who does not understand what is being said, but who, hearing his own name, makes sure that it is something pleasant and friendly.

'Does he speak English?' asked St. Claire.

'No. Poor creatures, they are so benighted!' replied Mrs. Stewart. 'They know absolutely nothing—no English—nothing of the Bible; you cannot call them Christians; indeed they are half savages.'

'No, mamma, Vincenzo is not a savage. He is a gentleman by birth, and as good as we are,' said Ione, suddenly. 'He cannot help being a Roman Catholic, if that is what you mean by being benighted. He was born so.'

'Don't speak to mother like that, Nony,' said Clarissa, sharply.

Vincenzo shifted his feet and took off his cap, which he twisted round and round in his hand. He was smiling as he had been smiling all the while; but the expression on his face was somehow different from what it had been; and once, when he looked at Ione, when no one watched him, his eyes were like burning coals—but not fierce nor unfriendly.

'He must have Saracenic blood in him,' said St. Claire, critical and professional.

'That is self-evident,' said Captain Stewart. 'He is a good fellow for what he is—the least of a scoundrel of any I have about me; but he is an uncommonly ugly dog, I must admit.'

'Yes; he is no beauty,' laughed St. Claire.

And then Vincenzo lifted his coal-black, deep-set, shining eyes into the young doctor's face and smiled benignly. He evidently imagined that St. Claire had said something that was complimentary and pleasant.

After this they all turned with the master, and went through the garden to the mill, which was at a little distance from the house. Their way led through hedges of monthly roses in the full perfection of their waxen bloom and delicate perfume; by large shrubs of broad-leaved fragrant geraniums, not yet in flower; by miniature trees of glossy-leaved myrtle; by agaves and aloes and palms—giving a strangely tropical character to the whole scene; by groves of oranges and silver-dusted olives; by impenetrable hedges, living walls, of huge prickly-pear, or cactus, or fichi d'India, as it may best please one to call those rude amorphous growths which are so like great vegetable beasts—beasts mutilated, wounded, torn, dismembered, yet surviving all ill-treatment by dint of strength and patience, and doing to the last, in spite of torture and ill-usage, their life's work of producing delicate and dainty fruit.

Those poor ill-used and all-enduring vegetable beasts!—they are nearly as pathetic as the tortured ‘ciuci’ of Castellammare!

How different it all was from anything to be seen in England! How much more luxuriant, how much more poetic, and how much less complete and orderly! Villa Clarissa was noted for its good management, but it would not have borne comparison with an English estate tilled by English hands; and the general look of loose-lying ends and unfinished bits everywhere, like vacant spaces in a mosaic, would have grieved the soul of a high-farming landowner. Here the marvel was, not the vacant spaces, but those filled in and perfected. Such as it was, however, it was very picturesque, very novel, rich, and lovely; and St. Claire forgot the weeds in the flowers and the partial disorder in the general profusion.

So, passing through this odd kind of enchanted ground, where wonders might have taken place as of the established order of things, they reached at last the mill to which they were bound, and whereof Vincenzo was the accredited overseer.

Half-a-dozen men were lounging about the place, doing a little here and a little there, in that desultory unmethodical way which seems to be more play than work and more pretence than reality. One moved a sack a few inches farther to the side, as it would appear quite unnecessarily and more as if to mask idleness than to do real work. Another examined with close attention the empty hoppers, which were protected against the wiles of the Evil One by a picture of the Madonna pasted against the upright. A third lazily rubbed the flour between his fingers; a fourth seemed to find a grave problem in the material of which the sack was made. But when the master and his party came in, even these perfunctory little activities ceased, and all grouped themselves about the sacks and columns of the hall, each man, with the unconscious grace of his nation, making a picture or representing a statue.

All seemed to turn as if involuntarily to Ione. The master was the master, whose favour represented the bread and wine and oil of their homes; the mistress was the mistress whose grace gave extra gratuities to fill the gaps made by the hand of the Church and the cursed ill-chance of the lotto; but that younger Signorina, that fair-haired girl, who was as if one of them and yet was not—she was the flower they all admired, the shrine at which they all worshipped, the cynosure of all their bold black roving eyes, the uncrowned queen to whom all their fervent and ideal loyalty was devoted. From Vincenzo to that young lad of sixteen, lounging with the grace of a forest animal and the unconscious dignity of a red Indian across a sack, and devouring Ione with his eyes, all turned to her as naturally as Mohammedans to their far-off Mecca, as Sabians to the sun.

To Clarissa came none of this ardent devotion. She had not

that electric quality, that magnetic power, possessed in such abundance by Ione. She was just a nice little plump white human pigeon to them—no more ; but Ione was the young goddess whom each man secretly loved as a woman, yet scarcely wished to find less than divine.

The girl seemed to feel her position as the untitled queen of all these unsworn subjects, for she was superb in her easy consciousness of power—her strange eyes flashing now on one now on another as she silently gathered up their homage and secretly returned encouragement. In that uncongenial life of home, where she was always as if in disgrace and somewhat under chastisement, it pleased her to feel that here, among her adopted father's men, she was supreme, and that, lowly as it might be, she had an empire which no one could invade. To a woman a sceptre is always a sceptre ; and, in default of gold and ivory, one of humble reeds or woodland flowers is better than none at all.

To-day the girl's fascination for these men seemed to be increased. Perhaps the mysterious force of her nature had gained in strength from the sin that she had committed and the passion that had possessed her. Who knows? We have not yet sounded all the depths of human nature ; and we do not know the full meaning of those words we use so glibly—Spiritual influence. Be that as it may, this spiritual influence always exercised by Ione over her father's men was to-day more potent even than usual. Vincenzo had told the whole story by a few gestures and glances as he came into the mill ; and each man and boy lounging there knew, as he looked, that in the long white hand so closely clasped the little bird lay dead ; and that Ione, who loved it, had killed it from jealousy and out of regard for her rights. They knew and sympathised and secretly adored her more than before. 'She is one of us,' they said among themselves. Daughter as she was of that cold and distant England, where the sun never shines, where no flowers bloom and no fruits ripen, she was nevertheless one of them.

And yet she, who seemed born for the life of the fervid South, was a passionate lover of England, that unknown but to her ideal land of individual rights and female liberty ; while Clarissa, who physically and by character was English to her finger-tips, cared for no place but Sicily and never wished to leave Palermo.

By looks and signs the story of Ione's jealousy and revenge had been told by Vincenzo to all the men at the mill. By looks and signs too, the new-comer was discussed—and pronounced a man of no account. He was to be ranked with Clarissa and human pigeons ; but he was not of the height and stature of Ione, their queen. They need not trouble themselves about him. To be sure he was one of that powerful nation whose supremacy they had to acknowledge in their padrone ; but he was only a poor creature for all his



soft eyes and that strange beauty of face which was of the type that painters have taken for St. John or the Christ. And they, the fiery children of the South, with the living sun in their veins, had the right to despise him as one of the traditional 'machines' of his race.

And thus, before his face, unseen and undetected, went round from each to each a whole litany of contempt; and the stranger was relegated to the limbo of the despised. Monica had wept for him in the solitude of her chamber—Monica, the sweetest flower and purest growth of womanhood; but these wild and ignorant Sicilian peasants ridiculed and contemned him and ranked him below a girl as wild, as passionate, and nearly as ignorant, as themselves.

The visit to the mill over, they all went back to the house, where the luncheon was English in design and Sicilian in execution—like the translation of a ballad into terza rima. But it pleased St. Claire, disposed to be pleased with everything at the Villa Clarissa. He felt as if he should get well and strong now. Yesterday and to-day had given him a lift onward—such a sensitive and impressionable creature as he was, and so painfully under the influence of his imagination and affections!

The only thing that disturbed the absolute enjoyment of the hour was the anomalous position which Ione seemed to hold in the family. A daughter, like Clarissa, there was yet the most undeniable if subtle difference made between her and her sister. Where the one was listened to with that kind of respect which springs from love, the other was contradicted and opposed with the chronic contempt of chronic displeasure. Where the one seemed to be in the full sunshine of favour, the other was evidently in the cold shade of mild disgrace. Even the very speech and manner of the girls themselves was different, for where Clarissa called her parents father and mother, Ione said *papa* and *mamma*; where Clarissa kissed and fondled each by turn, to receive back as much as she gave, Ione never laid her hand on either, nor was she caressed more than she herself caressed. And St. Claire wondered why there was this strange discrepancy of spirit and bearing, and why the younger daughter was always spoken to in the reproving manner of one under enduring chastisement. What had she done?—How had she offended that she should be thus rebuffed? He admired her immensely; did she not suggest Monica Barrington?—if only in that evasive way of false likenesses and imaginative suggestions, which vanish as you examine them till at last the first impression becomes merely a memory and no longer a fact—still, did she not suggest Monica?

Nevertheless, despite all his admiration, all his sympathy, he was sorry that she had killed the bird. The act which had roused for her the ardent admiration of the men at the mill, had saddened



him. He could not say that it had revolted him. His repulsion was not so strong as that; but it had shocked and made him sorry. All the same, he did not like to hear her spoken to as if under perpetual chastisement and in enduring if mild disgrace; and he wondered how such manifestly kind people as the Stewarts had the heart to do it.

After a time Ione, who had lapsed into absolute silence, sitting by the window and looking out on the garden as if dreaming with her eyes open, got up and left the room, and St. Claire saw her no more. It came to be time for him to leave, but still she did not appear; and he had to bid the family farewell without including her. As he went through the court she suddenly appeared from under the archway of the outer staircase and came up to him, almost as if she had watched for him. And yet, it had been only by chance that he had not been accompanied to the gate according to the sweet and hospitable fashion of the place; in which case watching for him, to have a word with him alone, would have been a needless trouble.

'Good-bye,' she said, offering her hand. 'I want to say I am sorry I killed the bird.'

'Thank you. I am glad that you have said this,' said St. Claire, fervently. 'God bless you!'

'You are very good—very, very good,' said Ione, looking into his face, her dilated eyes as dark as night. 'I feel that you will understand me.'

Then she turned away, and in a moment she had gone.

'She has conscience and a heart,' said St. Claire to himself as he passed through the gate, his own heart considerably the lighter for this philanthropic relief. 'I am glad she is a good girl after all!'

As he thought this, Vincenzo, lounging with his noiseless step along the sunny side of the garden-wall, came up to the carriage, the door of which he opened, while he took off his cap with a smile.

'Thank you,' said St. Claire, a little brusquely.

The man inspired him with a certain horror, and for the life of him he could not be suave and sweet as he generally was.

There was no smile on the Sicilian's face as he looked after the carriage and made a significant movement with his hand—no smile, but a scowl that made the blazing fire of his eyes yet more potent, as he peered through the bars of the gate and saw Ione, with a dead-white face and tears in her eyes, standing motionless by the fountain, the dead bird in her relaxed hand, while she looked at the falling water, conscious of only one thought, one feeling: 'I am glad I confessed I was sorry—glad that he was pleased with me and said God bless you!'

Then Vincenzo came through the gate and went up to her.

‘Shall I make the little coffin, Signorina?’ he said, his head uncovered, and his dark eyes reading her face as if he would read down into her heart.

She turned from him impatiently. He had interrupted her thoughts, broken the flow of her soothing stream of repentance, and she was angry with him, as she often was; for all that she upheld him when Mrs. Stewart found fault with him, and rebuked those who rebuked him.

‘No,’ she said haughtily; ‘when I want you to do anything for me, Vincenzo, I will ask you—you need not offer.’

‘The Signorina is mistress. She could never ask me for what I would not give her—even my life,’ said Vincenzo, with more earnestness than is generally thrown into such-like professions of faith and offers of service. ‘But the little bird cannot be kept. He must be buried; and soon.’

‘Leave me. You are impertinent—you are tiresome!’ said Ione, angrily. ‘If I choose, he shall not be buried at all. I am the mistress. If I choose to keep him, what is that to you?’

‘Padrona,’ said Vincenzo, humbly. ‘But it will do you harm to keep him, Signorina. It will give you fever.’

‘What right have you to speak? You shall not take my bird from me! Leave me, I say!’ said Ione, with vehemence and passion.

‘Padrona,’ repeated Vincenzo; and at the word he was gone, rounding the corner of the house like a dusky shadow gliding from her path.

Then Ione dashed away for her own part into a special place among the trees which she had made her own, and where she always went when oppressed and disturbed. And here, throwing herself on the ground, she covered the dead bird with passionate kisses, saying again and again: ‘I loved you, Mimi! I loved you! Oh, believe that I loved you! I killed you, but I loved you!’

## CHAPTER XIV.

### DOMESTICATED.

‘We shall have to introduce you to some of our friends,’ said Captain Stewart one day when St. Claire was at the Villa Clarissa, as he so often was now.

‘If you intend to pass the winter here you must go into society,’ said Mrs. Stewart, in her gently sorrowful way. ‘You will find some pleasant people both among ourselves and the Palermitans.’

'Yes,' said the Captain; 'that every one would say. The Palermitans are wonderfully hospitable to strangers who are fitly introduced.'

'I thought the Italians did not understand hospitality,' said St. Claire.

'In our way perhaps no, in their way yes. They do not ask you to dinner, but they give you a seat in their carriage and take you to eat ices. You cannot go in upon them at twelve o'clock in the day, but you are free of their salons every evening when they are at home; and you may go as early as the habits of the place allow and stay as late—not wearing out your welcome by repetition. We give food, they companionship. Our method is a survival of the time when starvation was a man's ever-present foe, theirs of a state of society when personal peril was the greatest fact of life—when, therefore, the defence of association was the greatest need, and admission to that association the supreme mark of confidence.'

'I see,' said St. Claire, who thought the explanation more ingenious than true.

'One thing will be sure to strike you—the dreadful number of titles here,' said Mrs. Stewart, in an aggrieved voice.

She rejoiced in the fact, but she liked to complain of it. She was too thoroughly English not to reverence rank, but she was also too thoroughly English not to resent the apportionment which gave that rank to the Palermitans and left themselves without 'handles,' though with undoubted pedigree.

'That makes no difference,' said Captain Stewart. 'Among themselves they are punctilious enough on the matter of relative rank, but they do not care two straws about it with us. An Englishman is always an Englishman to them, whether he be a lord or only a plain mister; and they like us as a race. Which is so much in our favour as individuals.'

'I am sure I wonder that they do!' said Ione, abruptly.

No one answered her; and though St. Claire looked at her, as if in response, he did not speak. He thought he should probably get her into trouble if he drew her out.

'I shall be very glad to know any of your friends,' he then said, having nothing else to say; but in his own mind he thought he should find none so congenial to him as were these hospitable Stewarts, with their pretty place and their charming daughters.

'I will put you up to a few of the most special,' then said the Captain, and forthwith began a list of princes and princesses, barons and baronesses, counts and countesses, till his guest wondered if the city held an untitled man or woman in its ranks at all. It was a long page of the Palermitan Almanach de Gotha to learn, but St. Claire had a good head and a retentive memory, and

social dignities came easily in his way. To be sure he made a few mistakes and misfits, as was but natural. He gave the grandfather as a son, and called the daughter-in-law the mother, and hopelessly jumbled up, as if in a bag, the various members of that large family, each of whom had a different name and title from the others. But he made out something definite at last, and established a kind of central point round which all the rest would cluster in time.

He made out clearly and distinctly the individuality of that travelled and well-read countess who had been everywhere, and who knew all the picturesque by-places as well as the general centres of interest in Europe. And her daughter—that ideal kind of princess whom all women loved and all men adored, whose mind was as rich as her personality was gracious—he got her, too, well established, so that he should know them both when he should be taken to call. That grand old princess, the doyenne of the local aristocracy, with her stainless repute and honourable name; her daughter so interesting and gentle and so curiously English in character; and her daughter again, so curiously English in physique—these images too, he fixed as those of people he was bound to respect and admire when he met them. The grandfather of this last, this fair-faced Palermitan lily, one of the many noble exiles of '48, was another personality not likely to slip. When he, St. Claire, came to know him, the Stewarts said, he would find him the most delightful companion in the world, and the best 'raconteur.' His stories of English life and experience were inimitable! And those two brothers, who also had been of the emigration—the elder, as Captain Stewart said: 'the best-bred man in the island;' to which Mrs. Stewart added as her testimony: 'with all the graces of his own race and all the virtues of ours, and with none of the faults of either'—the younger, in his time one of the most gallant soldiers of all in the national army—they were cleared from the mass, and made as sharp and distinct as two cameos. So were the noble-hearted, handsome wife and the graceful daughter with her gift of genius, belonging to the one—the bright and hospitable signora with the studious son, of the other. That charming group of friends and relations, so good and true and simple and sincere; the patriarch of the English colony, with his magnificent garden, his gentle wife and her sweet kindliness; the scholarly clergyman, and his wife, whose life had been a romance; the men of letters here; the men of science there; the pleasant baron; the kindly duke; the learned abbate; the famous professor—it was an interesting page of personal gossip, the 'carte du pays' well drawn out; and it amused St. Claire, who, as has been said, was fond of genealogy and local Debretts.

'Now be sure you distinguish one from the other, and do not confound A with B nor C with D,' said Captain Stewart. 'Above all, take pains to learn your pronunciation correctly. A letter

makes all the difference; as between that fascinating princess and my dear good friend Luigi, for example. Doubled when it should be single, or deprived of its consort when it should be doubled, will land you in more holes than one. So be careful.'

'I will do my best,' said St. Claire.

'How can it interest you to know anything of the people here, you who come from England?' said Ione, scornfully.

'Why not?' Armine answered. 'Do you not think it interesting to study differences?'

'Not for an Englishman to study a continental!' said Ione, superbly.

'How can you be so prejudiced, Nony!' said Clarissa. 'Why are not foreigners as good as we are? Poor dears! I am sure they are.'

'I don't think so,' said Ione; and on Mrs. Stewart returning plaintively: 'My poor dear misguided child, what can you possibly know of the matter?' and Captain Stewart adding bluntly: 'Shut up, Io, and let us have no more of your confounded nonsense!' that thread of talk dropped and was not taken up again.

And yet Ione had only said what she had heard a dozen times before from the two who represented her parents. Had Clarissa scoffed at the people among whom they had elected to make their home, they would have smiled at her enthusiastic patriotism, and would have said she was not so far wrong in her estimate—but what Clarissa might do with honour was counted to Ione for shame—even though the father and mother did their best to be just; and were just, according to their ability.

The Stewarts not only made themselves St. Claire's introducers to the society of the place, but they also took pains to show him everything of interest, and specially to localise the native legends and historic events. They took him to the exact spot where the Sicilian vespers began, and tried in vain to teach him how to pronounce that famous shibboleth of 'ciceri.' They traced the line on the hill where Garibaldi and his devoted band came down in their strength like a living stream dyed red with the glorious dawn, bringing the freedom of Sicily as their offering to Palermo. They translated for his benefit old ballads, like that of the 'Baronessa di Carini,' and told him those wonderful stories of courage and audacity which have already made of the brigand chief Leone a being almost as legendary as Fra Diavolo. They showed him over the new institutions, and severely criticised all the details of management, as the English always do, whether at home or abroad. They took him to the churches, some of which were under repair, and fell foul of every bit of modern work, however well done, which was to restore the lost substance of the old and fill up the gaps made by time. But then they would not have



been English here too, had they not idealised the remote past of Italy and vilified the immediate present. Had they not read their Ruskin? and was it not in their province, as members of the nation which set up the duke and his horse over a gateway, and substituted the griffin for Temple Bar, to lecture all others on taste and the conservation of things ancient and historic? and, above all, were not the picturesque ignorance and darkness, disease and misery of old times worth all the unæsthetic light and liberty and health and strength of these modern degenerate days? To hear the English in Italy, one would say that the prosperity, the education and liberty of a whole people are not worth a fine façade, nor an imposing procession; and that something pretty to look at is worth far more than free government or wholesome living. And the Stewarts, though enlightened people in their own way, were not proof against the prevailing folly of their race.

And finally, to complete their good offices, they introduced him to society, so that he was made free of all the houses which were open to themselves.

Then it was that he found for himself how frank and hospitable are these dear Italian islanders, with the proud and capable Saracenic strain running through their blood; their myths of old Greece floating like perfume and echoing like music through the air; their pathetic history and their stirring feuds; their saintly legends, which jostle and displace the divine old myths, or rather, into which those myths have transformed themselves; their commemorative customs which lift out of the commonplace into the ideal;—those dear Italian islanders, to know whom is to love!—as he proved for his own part; and with reason.

The countess showed him her house and the count took him over his garden. The princess had him to her receptions and made him a favourite guest when out for her villeggiatura. The two dear brothers invited him to dinner, and the girl entranced him with her singing. Every one was kind to him, every one made much of him—the women, because he was so interesting and handsome and delicate and young, and the men, because it pleased the women and he looked as if he had no harm in him. So that for a broken-hearted lover, as he was, St. Claire enjoyed himself discreetly and carried his secret sorrows bravely.

Truly, without disloyalty to his lost love, his wounds were doing well. A spiritual surgeon, making his diagnosis with judgment, would have said that they were granulating apace and looking remarkably healthy. It must be so. To live with a dead joy never absent from one's consciousness is very soon to die with it. For the mind follows the law of the body, and wounds which will not heal bring all things to destruction.

So the time passed. The soft-spoken, gentle-mannered, handsome young fellow was so accustomed to be petted and caressed—

so used to be treated as a personage of importance—that all the kindness lavished on him by his new friends came to him as by prescriptive right, and he took it with that simplicity of acceptance which of itself is a charm in the beautiful young. He made no disclaimers and no opposition; showed no surprise, and only expressed his gratitude by smiling amiably when he was flattered, and looking content when he was singled out for supreme attention and marked kindness. When bright eyes shone the brighter as he entered the room, and sweet voices had an extra touch of silver as they spoke to him, he took it all as one who knew the whole rosary by heart, and who received only his due. And this quiet unconsciousness of any special grace in the favours accorded him made part of his success with the women. The men, perhaps, said a few hard things among themselves, as was but natural; but the women found it lovely. It was the unconscious self-assertion of a superior person whose credentials are undeniable. It was the prince travelling incognito, who does not think it strange when some more acute than the rest drops a court courtesy, and says, Your Royal Highness.

He took it all so much as his by right that surely it was so. Well-dressed, well-mannered, with his air of accustomedness to luxury and homage and the finer things of life, he had the look of a man richer than his expenditure, and superior to the conditions which it has pleased him for the moment to adopt. To see him here in Palermo no one would have supposed that for his sole wealth he had only what remained of those three hundred pounds which had been brought him by the ravens, and the reversionary interest, when his health should be re-established, of a small country practice which gave him bread and left no margin for butter. He had the air of thousands a year; and Palermo set him down at the value of his looks.

This was not his fault. The most rigid moralist could scarcely have held him bound to appear poor for truth's sake, or to publish a statement of his finances in 'Lo Statuto.' It had been his misfortune before now to look one thing and be another; and this was only a repetition of the old litany of misunderstanding which more than once had been intoned to his disaster.

Where all liked him, the Stewarts liked him most of all. Even the wiry and determined Captain, his very antithesis in some things, found points of agreement in others, which made the running smooth. To be sure he would not have chosen this soft-voiced and gentle-mannered young physician as his partner in a difficult business, where he had risked his fortune to save it only by bold combinations and resolute action. He would not have put him at the head of an exploring expedition where courage and endurance were the alphabet of success; nor would he have sent him where astuteness and diplomatic fence were the great things

needed. But he liked him as a guest; he trusted him with the girls; and he believed him to be a man to whom any father might safely give his daughter, sure that, when he married, his wife's happiness would be welded into the very substance of her wedding-ring.

As they saw more and more of him, both father and mother felt, what they did not acknowledge even to each other, that, as Clarissa's choice, this charming young fellow should meet with no opposition, and Guli should supply the wedding-cake. They had decided, as we know, that Clarissa should not marry a Sicilian; and the English colony was poor in available husbands. Though the farthest possible removed from wishing her to marry at all, they were too loving and just to desire her to remain single for their sakes. And here was the man who, in body, mind, and estate, seemed made for the occasion.

They knew nothing of his broken fortunes and unhappy love. They saw him only as Edward Formby's friend, therefore to be trusted and believed in as what he seemed to be; and he seemed to be little less than a prince in disguise. In his sweet impartial way he was equally devoted to both girls; but parental love gave the balance that extra weight which made Clarissa turn the scale. How should she not? Who in his senses would prefer Ione, that uncomfortable anomaly with her red-gold hair and indescribable green eyes—that odd mixture of passion and indolence, of dreams and unrest—to a sweet-tempered sensible little pigeon like Clarissa, whose worst moods, compared to the ordinary outbursts of that other, were like April showers set against tropical tempests? And such a good wife as she would make!—so domestic, so clever in management, so notable and exact—did that count for nothing? Ione, who had been just as well trained, given the same advantages, and brought up on the same lines, could do nothing useful, and was discontented, undisciplined, and jealous. In fact, Ione was not to be thought of when Clarissa was to the fore; and St. Claire was far too nice a fellow to be thrown away.

Yes, the thing fitted. Now that his health had become so much more robust, and there was evidently nothing much amiss—given the question of settlements satisfactorily arranged—there would be no objection raised when the moment came.

Though the Captain did not harbour this thing as a planned future—only perceived it as a possible contingency—Mrs. Stewart, woman-like, cherished it as a charming picture, over which, however, she would break her heart should it cease to be a picture and become a living fact; and St. Claire got the good of the situation. Meanwhile the picture grew daily more vivid to the mother, as the handsome young fellow crept closer and closer into her affections, and she felt as Oakhurst before her had felt, that he was 'so good' and 'so pure.'

On his side, that healthy granulation of his wounds went steadily on, and the solid silver chain of friendship supplied the broken golden links of love; he all the time taking everything with that simplicity of acceptance which made petting and devotion his rightful due by the letters-patent of nature and fitness. Not that he was a coxcomb. He was simply a man in whom the feminine element predominated over the masculine—whose very virtues were feminine, and whose manhood was free from manly vices—who was sweet and gentle, and affectionate and pure, suspecting no evil, and meaning as little as he suspected. His character failed in force but was rich in beauty; and for the strength of will which was wanting he substituted delicacy of conscience, which perhaps came to the same thing in the end.

But with all this pleasant toying with this newly minted silver chain of friendship, his heart turned ever and ever back to the broken golden links, and he knew, with unwavering conviction, that Monica Barrington was the only woman he had ever loved or ever could love, as the true meaning of love goes. All before her had been phantasms—all after her would be ghosts; and neither in phantasms nor in ghosts is there solid substance for the heart or soul of man.

## CHAPTER XV.

### WHICH? OR EITHER?

NONE of his later friends took the place of the first with St. Claire. He was stanch to his flag, and allowed no one to exercise the same kind of fascination over him as did the Stewarts, with those two pretty girls as the chief workers of the spell. The glamour of the place was round Clarissa equally with Ione, and in his present poetic mood he idealised even that most commonplace little person, and made a bit of ordinary satin-stone do duty for a pearl of price.

It was all the fault of Nature—that grand enchantress who transmutes common earths into noble gems; all the fault of that great sun-god who hides beneath a veil of glory whatever is less than lovely, and touches into divine magnificence things which, left to themselves, are mean and sordid and of no repute.

Moreover, being heart-broken for Monica and pledged to eternal widowerhood and constancy, the young doctor had no scruple in surrendering himself to the fascinations of these two innocent Vivienues, believing Ione morally lovely against his better judgment and Clarissa poetically delightful against his truer perception.

Could it be said that he flirted? If he did, then it was with both girls at once—with one as much as, and no more than, with

the other. Had he been accused, he would have repudiated the accusation in all eagerness and sincerity, and would have said he meant nothing, and they knew that he meant nothing. But then we repudiate many things which the watching world asserts of us. And which, pray you, is true?—our own heart, with its trick of self-deception and power of blunting the fine edge of conscience, or the evidence gathered by those who think they see to the foundations when they do not penetrate below the surface? Between self-deception and purblindness poor Truth has a bad time of it;—as now, in the way in which things were going and judged of at the Villa Clarissa.

For instance, was it flirting when, one afternoon, as the young people were whiling away the time by spelling words with ivory letters, St. Claire, taking up the letters C. A. S., put them before Clarissa, saying: ‘Your initials are the same as mine, only transposed. Clarissa Alice Stewart—Armine St. Claire;’—looking at her as he spoke with eyes which seemed to be as full of love as his words were full of secret meaning? Perhaps Clarissa thought so; and perhaps Ione thought so; for the one blushed and looked down, and the other grew pale and looked away, as she held up her head with the severe disdain of one who will not waste her time in folly—or worse.

‘You cannot make any good of yours, if I can of mine,’ laughed Clarissa, glancing at her mother, who was comfortably dozing on the sofa. They say that the initials of our name should spell something sensible to bring good luck. Now A. S. C. don’t spell anything, do they? But I can make mine into a word—“cas.” I wonder what “cas”!’ she laughed again.

‘All that is beautiful!—all that is delightful!’ said St. Claire, with gallant fervour. ‘If only wishes were as powerful as they are sincere!’

‘Well, if they were?’ asked Clarissa, with sweet unconsciousness of backgrounds and double meanings.

‘You should be one of the golden glories of the world!’ said St. Claire, repeating the former phase of gallant fervour.

‘Oh, I should make a very bad kind of “golden glory”!’ said Clarissa, her eyes sparkling, her whole plump sleek little person sleeker and plumper than ever with this pleasant influx of gratified vanity. ‘I am only a humble little mouse. If I could be transformed I should like to be made into a bird or a flower, and to leave all the grand things to others.’

‘We will find some good fairy to make you into a pretty little singing-bird, and put you in a cage full of flowers;’ said St. Claire.

‘And then Nony would kill me,’ said Clarissa, with rather a falsetto accent in her voice.

‘No, she would take care of you and feed you with sugar,’ said St. Claire. ‘What shall we make you, Miss Ione?’ he asked



turning to the younger girl with just the same sweetness of manner as he had had when speaking to Clarissa. 'Will you be a golden glory, or a bird in a cage full of flowers? I fancy the former would suit you better than the latter. What do you say?'

Ione's rigid face did not relax by a line. She had no relish for the aftermath of attentions—for the mere gleanings of the field; and to talk nonsense—and such nonsense!—to her as a second to Clarissa was worse than neglect.

'I do not know what you are talking about!' she said with supreme disdain.

'Whether you will be a bird, like that poor little Mimi you killed, or a golden glory set upon a throne,' said Clarissa. 'I am going to be another Mimi—but you are not to kill me, you know. Dr. St. Claire has promised that you will not. He says you will give me sugar instead. Will you give me quantities of sugar, Nony?'

'Do not include me in such absurdity,' said Ione, proudly. 'You know how much I dislike nonsense.'

'I forgot that you are sacred when you play queen—and you are playing queen now,' said Clarissa, with unabated good-humour. 'We all have to attend to Nony's wishes when she plays queen,' she added blithely to St. Claire. 'Have we not, Nony?'

'If teasing is attending to one's wishes—yes,' said Ione.

'Naughty No! now you are cross,' laughed Clarissa, pinching her cheek. 'What a naughty little No it is!'

'Don't, Clarissa,' cried Ione, pushing away her sister's hand. 'You are too aggravating to be borne!'

'My dear Ione, your temper grows worse every day of your life,' said Mrs. Stewart, who had roused herself from her doze at the first sound of Ione's irritated voice. 'You allow yourself to be made angry by the merest trifle—you cannot bear a joke nor enter into any kind of innocent fun. I really do not know what to do with you,' she added, in her helplessly plaintive but not acrimonious way.

'It is not fun, mamma; it is ill-natured teasing,' said Ione.

'That is because you are ill-tempered, my poor girl. If you were as amiable as Clarissa, you would take things as she means them,' said Mrs. Stewart.

'I am sure I did not wish to tease you, Nony,' said Clarissa, with genuine amiability—perhaps a little heightened for the good effect to be produced. 'Do not scold her, mother. It was my fault. I ought to have been more careful,' she added nicely; and St. Claire thought to himself, 'What a heavenly temper that dear little girl has; and what a pity this beautiful creature should be so nervous,' smiling on both with impartial benignity.

'I am sorry if I was cross; but you know you meant to tease me, Clarissa,' said Ione, with an effort.

And with this she got up and left the room, and no one saw her again for that night. She had a headache and had gone to bed, she said, when Clarissa knocked at her barred door to tell her to come into the drawing-room to wish Dr. St. Claire good-night, as he was going away. But Vincenzo, who found himself in the garden beneath her window long after midnight, saw her sitting out on the loggia in the moonlight, with a look on her face which went to his heart like a wound; and which he thought to himself: How could he avenge?

This was one example of St. Claire's mindless method of making love—but to which? Or it might be simply an instance of his ordinary manner, according to the way in which it was taken. In any case it must be confessed that it was a manner to the highest extent silly, yet both misleading and provocative.

Another time he was singing one of his pretty little French songs—that whereof the burden was: '*M'amie que j'aime tant!*' While he sang he looked at Ione, only because she chanced to be in the line of vision, and he must look at something. But, because as he had last sung that song to Monica, his voice was full now of tremulous passion and his eyes were dark and tender with unshed tears. And when a handsome young fellow looks full into the face of a beautiful girl, with such eloquence of feeling as St. Claire betrayed at this moment, and says in tones which vibrate with the very pathos of devotion: '*M'amie que j'aime tant!*' what can people think but that this too is a method of making love?

Yet, in truth, nothing was farther from Armine's thoughts than wilful love-making. It was only his treacherous eyes, and his state of gentle melancholy and chronic heartbreak which made him look like it. But Ione's cheeks turned pale, and her eyes were dark as night as she cast them down beneath her heavy lids; and her heart, whispering to her hope: Was it meant? was answered back by both pride and fear.

St. Claire had a fine cat's-eye ring. It was almost unique for colour and lustre, and he was proud of it. It was one of the few things which he had preserved from the wreck of his fortune, and he always felt that in some sense his good luck was bound up with this gem. One day Mrs. Stewart—who, by the way, was invariably present while St. Claire made his odd double-handed love—asked to see this ring. He took it from his finger and gave it to her. From her it passed to Clarissa, who, girl-like, put it on her own finger. But it was too large for any of the pretty little pink fingers which made the delight of the Palermitan glove-makers, and her own despair at their constant misfits. It was next handed to Ione, who looked at it without trying it on.

'See if it fits you,' said St. Claire, as if it had been the glass slipper and he the prince on the search for Cinderella.

Her hand, though finely shaped, was many sizes larger than

Clarissa's; and St. Claire's was small for a man. The ring which he wore on his little finger fitted her third to perfection—her third—the fatal finger of a woman's hand!

'It goes perfectly,' said St. Claire, with a smile. 'I did not think our hands paired so well.'

'If they do, yours must be too small for a man, or Ione's too large for a woman,' said Mrs. Stewart, with her usual manner of gentle displeasure.

To which Ione, holding up her beautiful hands in the pose in which they made the best lines and had the most becoming physiognomy, said, with hypocritical humility: 'Mine are too large for a woman, mamma. Did you ever see such awful monsters?'

'No, they are beautiful!' said St. Claire, with anatomical admiration. 'And so,' turning to Clarissa, 'are yours, Miss Stewart—of a different style from your sister's, but equally beautiful.'

'You have catholic tastes, Dr. St. Claire,' said Mrs. Stewart, a shade of petulance mingled with her general melancholy.

'I cultivate catholicity of taste. I have a great dislike to one-sidedness and narrowness,' answered Dr. St. Claire, in his sweet way.

'One may be too catholic,' returned Clarissa's mother. 'I will say to you what our good clergyman once said to a dreadful sceptic who was here: "Better be anchored to something, no matter what, than floating about at the mercy of every wind that blows."'

'Yes, in matters of opinion; but in the faculty of finding the beautiful—is it not better to be able to find that everywhere than only in a few isolated spots?' asked St. Claire.

'If you confine yourself to what you call finding the beautiful, to pictures or places or churches, perhaps you are right,' answered Mrs. Stewart. 'But this kind of temperament goes into so much else, and sometimes leads to great danger—to latitudinarianism, for example, and indecision of character all through.'

'It may, but not necessarily,' said St. Claire.

'It is so much better to know your own mind and hold by your opinions,' said Mrs. Stewart.

And St. Claire could not for the life of him imagine what she meant, or of what she was vaguely accusing him. He had never seen her so nearly ill-tempered as she was to-day; and he looked at her with professional criticism to catch the hues and lines which should give him the key and tell him what ailed her body and consequently warped her mind. But he could make out nothing different from other days; so he took refuge in that wide haven of unknown influences, the atmosphere; and said to himself: 'She is under the weather. Perhaps it is scirocco.'

Soon after this they went into the garden, as they always did

when St. Claire was at the villa; for he was not weary yet of this strange and delightful sensation of being in the heart of summer in February and March; and the Stewarts too were fond of flowers and fresh air.

As they strolled along the pathway, bordered with roses of all kinds and shades, St. Claire picked a beautiful 'blush' bud; round, smooth, compact, delicately tinted; which he gave to Clarissa, saying, with a charming smile: 'Like to like, as the old valentines say; or Sweets to the sweet—that is better.'

Whereat Mrs. Stewart, in her turn gently smiling, though with the intention of mild reproof, said: 'You must not spoil my child by flattering her too much, Dr. St. Claire.'

'I do not think she could be spoilt,' returned St. Claire, in his sweet way. 'She is too good!'

'Yes,' said Mrs. Stewart; 'that is just it—she is too good to be spoilt. But we do not mean the same thing. We use the phrase differently. I mean that she is so nice now, it would be a pity to spoil her by flattery; and your meaning is not the same.'

'Is telling people you admire them—is giving them credit for their good qualities, flattery?' asked St. Claire, amiably argumentative. 'I do not think so. There are so many willing to tell us all sorts of disagreeables and horrors, I think it only fair to declare what we admire, and praise candidly what is deserving of praise.'

'It is an amiable feeling, but a rather dangerous practice,' said Mrs. Stewart, a little drily; but when St. Claire replied: 'You are always so just and generous in your sentiments, Mrs. Stewart, I am conscious I ought to attend to your advice,' she did not see that this was flattery, nor that the handsome young fellow reinstated himself in her good graces by the very repetition of the fault which had in some sense disturbed his holding.

It would not have disturbed her at all had St. Claire been content to flatter Clarissa alone. It was the association of Ione—the reduplication—which fretted her. For instance, after this little passage of arms, where the foils were sheathed in velvet scabbards, the young physician tripped again in his fence; and this time more grievously.

Ione had heard nothing of that compliment and the small discussion founded on it. She had wandered away alone, as she often did, no one knew why, and was now sauntering between the thick lines—indeed almost hedgerows—of spiked lavender, which hid all but her golden head and proud columnar throat. They all met where the rose-path intersected the lavender. At this point was the most beautiful rose-tree in the garden—that superb and royal gloire de Dijon which people bribed the gardener to despoil for them, and paid heavily for buds and cuttings; which last, it must be said, by some mysterious fatality, never came to any good.

Antonio accepted the money and gave the equivalent; but he took care that this equivalent should never fructify, and that his padrone alone should possess the prize.

St. Claire picked one of the half-opened flowers and offered it to Ione.

'The queen of the flowers to the queen of the garden,' he said, thinking of Clarissa's accusation of queenliness, and meaning nothing more than he had meant to Clarissa—nothing more than if he had offered a sugar-plum to a child and kissed her afterwards.

'Now, Dr. St. Claire, what have I just been saying?' said Mrs. Stewart, sharply. 'I will not have these girls spoilt and made fools of!'

In a moment Ione comprehended the situation. Her eye caught the blush rosebud in Clarissa's breast; her ear the acrid accent in her adopted mother's voice; and her jealous fancy supplied the rest.

'Here, Clarissa,' she said, giving her the rose. 'Roses and pretty speeches belong to you, not to me.'

'Thank you, Nony, but keep your own,' said Clarissa, quite amiably. 'Pink and yellow do not go together, and I am satisfied with what I have.'

'Will you not have it?' asked Ione, offering it for the second time.

'No!' said Clarissa.

'Nonsense, Ione, take your rose and wear it, and do not make such a fuss about a mere trifle like this!' said Mrs. Stewart, with more and more acridity of voice and manner.

'I do not want it,' said Ione, tearing the petals from the calyx and tossing them in a pale golden shower among the scented leaves of the lavender.

A few minutes after, St. Claire had drawn her away from the others and was standing with her among the roses alone.

'How did I offend you by giving you that rose?' he asked anxiously, his beautiful eyes full of misleading tenderness and undesigned pathos.

'You did not offend me,' said Ione, proudly.

'Then why did you not wear it, as your sister wore hers?' he asked. 'Why did you destroy it and fling it so contemptuously away, if you were not annoyed with me for giving it to you?'

'And why should you give me one when you had already given one to Clarissa?' returned Ione. 'Do you think it a compliment to any girl to come second?'

'But some one must be first in order of time,' pleaded St. Claire. 'Order of time does not make order of merit or degree of interest,' he added soothingly, looking at Ione as if he loved her.

'I do not understand sharing, and I will never take the second



place,' said Ione, sticking to her own point, and wide of St. Claire's.

And with this she walked proudly away, her head erect, her shoulders straight, her face set like a flint, and her heart full of hatred to all the world, but specially full of contempt for Clarissa and anger against St. Claire.

He, poor fellow, was lost in a kind of mental fog, wherein he was only conscious of amazement and distress—amazement that he had so evidently hurt Ione by such a commonplace little action, and distress that he had blundered so innocently into evil. The true solution never entered his mind; and he gave the credit of all this abnormal susceptibility to that much-enduring beast of burden the weather—that scapegoat which has to carry so many sins of temper on its back, as now it bore Ione's exaggerated exclusiveness, just as it had carried Mrs. Stewart's unwonted acerbity.

'Assuredly I must pick no more roses at the Villa Clarissa!' he said to himself as he walked home to his hotel. 'They are as dangerous as those which cost the merchant his daughter and gave poor Beauty to the Beast! It is enchanted ground all through, and things are not what they seem from first to last. What is true, however, is the sweet amiability of that pretty little Clarissa, and the exceedingly regrettable temper of that beautiful Ione. What a pity she should spoil herself as she does by her temper! And what a pity, too, that they should not treat her with a little more consideration of her infirmity! It is only humane and philosophical to be considerate of an infirmity like that,' he went on to say to himself, with the serene philosophy of people who judge from a distance and whose nerves are not worn by the peculiarities which rasp those of close companions bare. 'We all have our faults; but what kind of life should we make if we were not forbearing one to the other? Of course we ought to be forbearing. And that is just where these dear delightful people fail with Ione—they are not forbearing enough to her, and do not know how to treat her. Ah! if Monica, that beautiful, that half-divine Monica, could but know her! What good she would do her! How she would bring out all that is lovely in her nature and check by her sweet example all that is unworthy! Beautiful and half-divine in very truth—ah! I shall never see her like! No one is her equal! She stands alone like the crowned queen of gracious womanhood; and I love her, and have lost her!

Back over his heart came the old rush of grieving love. His wounds reopened and bled with all their former violence. He forgot Palermo, the Stewarts, Ione, his present place, the present moment, and where his footsteps fell and whither they were leading him. He walked on mechanically, like a somnambulist in his dreams, unconscious of whom he met, unconscious, too, that

tears were in his eyes. He was once more with Monica in the garden, going through the agony of his denied love; and all the rest was blank. He saw nothing and knew nothing; not even that he passed so close by Captain Stewart as to touch his shoulder with his own.

‘Has St. Claire been here to-day?’ asked the Captain when he reached home after this odd encounter.

‘Yes,’ returned Mrs. Stewart.

‘Did anything happen?’ the master inquired again.

‘No, nothing,’ was the reply; but Clarissa blushed a little at her mother’s disclaimer, and Ione’s strange eyes flashed, and her cheeks turned ashen pale.

‘Well, he looked like a man possessed, or who has had some heavy sorrow,’ said the Captain, with a sharp glance beneath his eyebrows at each of the girls in turn. ‘He was walking down the Maqueda, evidently seeing nothing and no one; for he touched me as he passed and never saw me at all; and I swear his eyes were full of tears!’

‘Impossible!’ said Mrs. Stewart.

‘I saw them,’ repeated her husband. ‘His face was as white as a sheet, his eyes were straight before him, and, as I live, they were full of tears!’

‘How extraordinary!—how very distressing!’ said Mrs. Stewart, with a curious little sentiment of pleasure in her sympathy.

‘Did he seem out of sorts?’ asked her husband.

‘No; he was in very good spirits all the time he was here,’ she replied. And on the Captain saying ‘Humph!’ the conversation dropped.

But each woman gave a different version to her own heart.

‘Poor sensitive young fellow, he was pained because I scolded him,’ thought Mrs. Stewart, with the complacency of gratified power.

‘He thought that mother did not like him to be kind to me,’ said Clarissa to herself, with that soft little smile of pleased vanity of which the satin lining is nascent love.

And: ‘I made him feel—I made him unhappy. He did not mean to slight me, and he does respect my rights,’ were Ione’s thoughts as she sat by her window and looked out on the stars, and felt her heart throb with the passionate beat of triumphant pride and assuaged jealousy;—no longer the second, but emphatically the first!

## CHAPTER XVI.

## A DAY WITH THE GODS.

AMONG the pleasant home-customs kept up by the English colony in Palermo, that of making picnic parties to beautiful spots in the neighbourhood is the most delightful. The climate lends itself to this form of enjoyment perhaps better than to any other, and the traditions of the old country are in perfect harmony with the conditions of the new.

The Stewarts were great people for these picnic parties; and their charming outings to Mondello Bay, to Solanto, to Sferriavallo, and the like, were among the festas which counted as social blue ribands to the invited. Having now a young prince in disguise like Armine St. Claire, to show attention to whom was both pleasure and duty in one, they turned over the idea of a luncheon *al fresco* at Mondello Bay till they got it into working order; finally arranging to give on a certain Thursday one of those charming picnics, after the manner of the Anglo-Palermians, in honour of the handsome and heart-broken adorer of dreamy-eyed Monica Barrington—provided only that the scirocco did not blow in those maddening clouds of dust which render life intolerable and locomotion impossible, reducing all sensation to suffering and all virtue to patience!

No such mischance, however, happened on this special Thursday. The air being as clear as crystal, and no wind to speak of blowing from any quarter at all, the party that had been proposed came off in due course; and all who had been invited were present on the ground and punctual to the time.

No festa ever promised fairer than this which had been got up in St. Claire's special honour. Though winter according to the calendar, it was summer according to Réaumur; and the day was one made for happiness alone. It was a day which justified the reputation of the Sicilian climate, and gave those who rejoiced in its splendour cause to pity the poor frozen and befogged dwellers in the brave old home. Bright, light, warm, and full of colour, the atmosphere was as if just renewed in the great laboratory of nature. What germs it held were surely only the forms of beautiful growths and harmonious conditions! Disease, decay, rust and stain, could not exist in that exquisite envelope, that luminous ocean of untainted air; but all forms of beauty floated like filmy clouds across the deep blue sky and looked out from the depths of the translucent sea. The old gods were once more the mild rulers of heaven, the benevolent guests of men, the glad lovers of nymph

and mortal maid; and the past, the present, and the future made one great whole of glorious memory, of perfect possession, of divine foreshadowing.

It needed no great stretch of imagination to believe that once, when the world was young and the far-seeing gods were democratic in their lives and wholly human in their loves, on such a day as this Arethusa was pursued and Semele was beloved; that Europa and her companions garlanded the divine bull with asphodels and amaranths, and Proserpine laughed as she stood knee-deep in flowers on the fatal plains of Enna; that naiads sported with their amorous tritons in the coral caves of the purple sea; that nymphs, wreathed with myrtle, played with young fauns in the shadow of the ilex-woods; that Bacchantes, crowned with vine-leaves, danced in the abandonment of youth and the passionate joy of life while Dionysos and Ampelus looked on, leaning against each other on the ivory couch spread with leopard skins and strewn with roses; that Anadyomene rose in her golden shell from the iridescent foam, and heaven and earth met in loving contact at her feet. It was a day created for love and consecrated to beauty—a day which makes the young unquiet and leaves the old retrospective; the one full of vague melancholy and unformed desires, the other of dear memories overshadowed by regrets that youth should have been so short and time so swift, and the master-flame of life so soon burnt out!

*Lucus à non lucendo*, because there was not a line of natural relation between Mondello Bay and Oakhurst, not a trace of atmospheric association between this burning sky of Sicily and the pale sunshine of England, St. Claire's heart was full of Monica and the Dower House. Wherever he turned he saw the dreamy grey eyes of the girl he loved—whatever he heard had in it the echo of her soft voice. The love which he carried in his heart transformed all to its own likeness, and stimulated by the pungent vitality of the day, his partially healed wounds reopened, in spite of their healthy granulation, and bled afresh—as they had bled on the day when Ione had disclaimed his flower and Captain Stewart had met him with tears in his eyes, walking like a somnambulist down the Via Maqueda.

And so, because he was secretly grieving for the loss of one girl, his manners to these other two were even sweeter, more flattering, more sympathetic than usual; his eyes were softer and fuller of unspoken love; his voice was lower and more seductive in its musical intonation; and his whole being was more and more inter-penetrated by that dumb misleading eloquence which proclaimed him the lover he was—but the lover, neither of Clarissa nor of Ione, but of Monica Barrington, unknown and far away.

Yet who thinks of the possibility of the unknown and far away, when this misleading eloquence of unspoken love reveals itself in

every word and gesture, every look and accent, of a handsome young man, apparently devoted to one of two pretty girls!—which of the two, however, by no means certain, and the choice one which your own imagination may make at its will? Who suspects a palimpsest, written thick and close with unpublished songs of passion and sorrow, in the tablet which looks untouched, save for the first faint tracing of that little word of LOVE which time is sure to deepen? Palimpsests as we all know ourselves to be so soon as the early days of youth are passed, we accept the seemingly smooth tablet of others with child-like faith; and when we read that little word drawn lightly across the wax we believe it to be of yesterday's inscription and due to our own spiritual penmanship. Fools that we are! It is some old and ineffaceable engraving, the lines of which strike up through the modern overlay, because so deeply marked that nothing can ever obliterate them. They look like new; but in truth they are the old—the old which renew themselves under all the changed conditions of the surface of things—the old which are eternal, while that surface of things is the sole shifting circumstance. How much of the love we give is the perennial flower of habit? How much of that which we receive is the recurrent fruit of memory? Hearts are like the stems of certain trees, ringed round and round with successive layers. But in the centre is the pith which is always the same, which is only overlaid by new envelopes, and which is the cause and formative energy of all. 'On revient toujours à ses premières amours.' But, does one ever really abandon them? The first child born by the soul to Love modifies all that come after, and every new departure is only in a certain sense a retracing of the old way. The jealous have some reason, then, for demanding absolute virginity of heart in those they love; unless to be jostled and confounded in the memory and association is of no importance to them, and they can make themselves content with the actual fact and the present moment. And the actual fact and the present moment are but very fractional parts of life!

Other young men besides St. Claire were at the picnic. Among them was one specially smart and well-set-up young fellow, the Marchese Mazzarelli, one of the prime social favourites of Palermo. Brilliant, clever, lively, and adept, with laughing eyes and a pleasant tenor voice, an excellent drawing-room conjuror and a graceful dancer, with an inexhaustible fund of good temper, good spirits, and social resource, it was no wonder that all the world agreed to treat him like the favourite child of the community—the spoiled darling of fortune—and to make him feel that he was most welcome where all were well received. He passed for being an admirer of Ione Stewart; but, as he was poor, and she had no marriage portion, his admiration would never be suffered to culminate into the *fiasco* of an offer and the heartbreak of impossibility.



With all his brightness and good spirits, and what looked on the surface like heedlessness and want of reflection, he had far too much solid Italian common sense for that! Had he been in Armine's place at Oakhurst, he would have recognised the unconquerable obstacles in his way at once; and he would have saved himself by flight or self-control from all that had overthrown the poor young physician. This self-control in the face of impossibility, by the way, is just the quality for which the world does not give the Italians credit. It happens to be the strongest they possess.

For the rest, Ione, who liked the Marchese as much as she liked any one in Palermo, loved him no more than she loved the rest. She had never deceived herself as to the name or extent of her feelings for him. For her there was but one kind of love—that which makes women martyrs, saints, or criminals—and this was not the liking that she had for Mazzarelli.

Nothing could have been more delightful than was the drive to Mondellò Bay, through the Favorita and along the fields which a week ago were red with crimson pheasant's eye, but now were blue with borage and veronica, pale yellow with wild sorrel, and golden with shining chrysanthemums. Tall spikes of Star of Bethlehem stood up like black-eyed meadow-queens in silver robes; the scarlet spears of the gladiolus burnt like flames among the brushwood; long lines of monthly roses, of pink and scarlet geraniums, of myrtle, of the feathery flowering tamarisk, grew wild in untended hedgerows; orange-gardens poured their powerful perfume in aerial torrents across the road; the coral-tree tossed its crimson blossoms like blood-red foam flecking the bright blue sky; the Judas-tree showed its stately purple against the silvery green of the gnarled and twisted olives; the delicately scented blossoms of the acacia made their odour felt like a low whisper after the louder note of the orange-gardens; and the birds sang from among the drooping branches of the pepper-tree and the thick covert of the ilex-groves, as they had sung from beech and oak when Theocritus wrote his idylls, and Comatas worsted Lacon in his trial of skill in song.

Every one was pleased and every one was pleasant. The girls sang snatches of part-songs, where the men put in now a bass and now a tenor—songs which were often interrupted by outbursts of laughter, as the clatter of passing carts with their tinkling bells and clinking vanes and ornaments of brass, drowned the silver of their voices and broke up what was at the best but very open order and a very ragged kind of going. Still, when one is young and happy and merry and silly, everything adds to enjoyment; and a *fiasco* does as well as a success.

It was so good to be alive on this bright sweet day of the gods!—so good to be young and healthy, and to know that one's

eyes were bright and one's cheeks both fresh and soft;—to know that the future was one's own—a treasure as yet unsecured, a domain as yet unconquered—but all the same one's own.

Even Ione, who was not much given to making herself happy with a multitude, and who generally despised what others admired, even she suffered herself to be thawed into a very creditable condition of good-humour, and took her part with the rest as if she had no special sorrows stinging at her heart like snakes. And Armine, who sat opposite to her and Clarissa, was so far untrue to his cherished memories as to add his sweet sympathetic voice when those part-songs were on hand; even condescending to trivialities like the chorus in the *Funicolare* and the like. But both he and Ione had somewhat the appearance of being happy under protest—like poetry demeaning itself to prose and tragedy forgetting its dignity in farce—which to some gave their good-fellowship a special charm and to others made it a little offensive and pedantic.

On the whole, however, the ayes had it; and every one agreed that this special day and special drive, not to speak of the company and association, were the most perfect, the most enjoyable, the most memorable that had ever been or ever could be. And so, in this mood of universal radiance and content, they drew up on the sands fronting Mondello Bay, and turned down the first leaf in this poetic little chapter of the great book of life and fate.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### REVELATIONS.

IF nothing could have been more delightful than the drive through the *Favorita* and rounding the spur of *Pellegrino*, nothing was more charming than that preliminary stroll on the sands while the servants were preparing the table under the tent already pitched. Ragged men and women, with half-naked children, stood as a fringe round the sandy dunes where grew cistus and myrtles, tamarisk and thorn-apple, with dwarf-iris at their feet. These poor creatures had gathered silently from all four quarters, as if they had come up from the ground; attracted by that strange instinct which brings wild things where prey is to be had, as well as instructed by that secret language which, in a few signs, had passed the news from one to the other that food was about and fragments were sure to fall.

As yet there was no separation into small groups or more intimate couples. The whole body kept together, like a battalion in close order; and so far as things had yet gone the order of the day was essentially republican and the administration com-

munistic. Everybody belonged to everybody else. There was no favouritism, no exclusiveness, no segregation. Armine looked at Ione, talked to Clarissa, laughed with the Lancini girls, and paid his *devoirs* like a man to Mrs. Stewart and the elder ladies. So did the other young men; and the girls were no more exclusive than their cavaliers. But when luncheon was over things were naturally changed. They could not all stand shoulder to shoulder like a well-drilled battalion for the whole afternoon; and when the wanderings and explorings, the searchings for shells, for flowers, for shade, for points of view, had set in, then the solid mass decomposed into groups here and couples there. And somehow, no one knew how, not even the girl herself, the Marchese Mazzarelli took possession of Ione—and kept what he took.

In general the young fellow's attentions did not displease Ione. She was a girl like others, and girl-like she enjoyed her triumphs. They put her into good-humour with herself; made her forget the insecurity of her fortunes and the unsatisfactory condition of all things with her; and tore down some of Clarissa's extra decorations. And this, to a girl of her jealous temperament, was always somewhat soothing. But to-day she wished that the Marchese would leave her to herself and carry his laughing eyes and pleasant words to Clarissa—who had coveted them not a little when she could not have them and had had none other to make up for the want of them. To-day she desired them no more than did Ione, and would have found them as unwelcome if she had not received them quite so ungraciously. For St. Claire had joined himself to the plump little human pigeon, and seemed as if he were pinned to her skirts, so close was he in his attendance. And when St. Claire was in the field all other men with these two girls were thrust into the hedge. He was their 'colour' for the moment, and they wore none other.

Devoured by jealousy, Ione only wanted to be alone. Life on this splendid day, when the gods had come back to earth, seemed somehow a terrible mistake. It was above all a mistake to her, cast up by the tide of chance from the depths, she knew neither whence nor how—a mere piece of human wreckage gathered up by hands which regretted their kindly work, and made her feel that they did. Without inherited rights, only with natural claims which she could not enforce, what a miserable life hers was! Had she been the daughter of well-placed parents whose acquaintance was of itself an honour, this new friend of theirs, this Dr. St. Claire, would not have deserted her for Clarissa! He would have been proud to have devoted himself to her; as indeed he ought to be now, for she was a truer friend to him than Clarissa was—much, much truer! If only she could find her own parents and have someone who could maintain her position—or, failing this, if she could but make a home for herself and be free and inde-

pendent! If only she could leave this beautiful island which, for all its beauty, was to her a prison—these memories of old times where the gods, who once were the friends of man, were to her like grinning spectres—if she could but get away from all she knew and begin a new life in free and independent England! If only she could!

How close St. Claire was standing by Clarissa! What was he showing her? What was he saying to her? How she wished that she could hear. How weak he was to waste his time on such a commonplace person as Clarissa. He would do far better to devote himself to one of those Lancini girls. At all events they had good eyes, and could use their fans with grace; but Clarissa's eyes were just like two china beads, and she used her fan as if it were a broom-handle. Really she would give up all interest in Dr. St. Claire. He was not worth it. No man who could devote himself like this to Clarissa was worth two thoughts from any other girl. What was he showing her? Their heads were nearly touching. And see! Clarissa was actually drawing her little finger across the palm of his hand, held curved like a cup, as if she were moving something lying in the hollow. She would look no more. The one was unworthy her interest, the other too hopelessly bad all through, to make their doings of any worth whatsoever. They might do as they would. It did not regard her!

Her heart on fire, her brain dizzy with her passionate and jealous wrath, Ione turned towards the sea as if to watch the waves as they ran lipping into shore; while Mazzarelli, always laughing and good-humoured, scraped the sand at her feet for shells, that he might make her find the largest, and glanced at intervals at Clarissa and St. Claire, as they stood there beneath the sun, looking like lovers and talking in commonplaces.

'Who is that young man?' at last asked Armine, his face turned to Mazzarelli.

'Which? Captain Bonacore?' asked Clarissa, looking after a cavalry officer almost out of sight among the rocks.

'He, talking to your sister,' said Armine.

He was not jealous like a man, only curious like a woman. Still, he wished that if Ione gathered shells in concert with a well-set-up, good-looking young fellow with laughing eyes, it had been with an Englishman and not an Italian.

'Oh! Mazzarelli—the Marchese Mazzarelli,' said Clarissa. 'He is a great friend of ours, and desperately in love with Nony.'

She made this statement with quite radiant satisfaction. A month ago she would have warmly denied it had it been made to her.

'I thought so,' said St. Claire, an odd little wave of displeasure, which might be called peevishness, overpowering the softer and more refined melancholy of his ordinary mood. 'Are they engaged?'

‘No, not yet. There is not quite enough money yet, else they would be. But as Nony has no dot, they have to wait till his fortunes are better. It will all come right when an old uncle or aunt, or something like that, of his dies,’ she added with her well-known amiability; looking sympathetically pleased that Nony had this not too distant nor too desperate chance of happiness.

‘Then she is in love with him?’ asked Monica’s adorer, with another little wave of sad displeasure.

‘Of course!’ said Clarissa, opening her eyes. ‘She would not encourage him as she does if she were not.’

Yet, for all her bold lapse from truth at this moment, Clarissa was by no means a chronic fibber. But she was not sorry to deal Ione this sharp backbender, as in some sense a fitting punishment for having attracted Mazzarelli. In her own manageable way she had liked the young Marchese herself, and had secretly resented the unmistakable assignment of his attentions to Ione. Now she no longer cared for him. Yet she would not let slip this opportunity for punishing the past. ‘Those who have been to the festa must pay the cost,’ she said to herself; ‘and Mazzarelli had been Ione’s festa quite often enough to make it right that she should pay when the time came.’

‘They will make a handsome couple,’ said St. Claire, looking at them with that kind of gentle envy which belongs to the sympathetic, disappointed in their own happiness, when they contemplate the blessedness of others.

‘Yes, he is very good-looking indeed,’ said Clarissa, emphasising the last word.

‘And your sister is lovely,’ returned St. Claire.

‘Do you really think so?’ asked Clarissa, in a tone of surprise. ‘I should say that Nony was more strange-looking than pretty—certainly not lovely, or anything like it! With red hair and yellow eyes, how can she be?’

‘I call her hair golden; and her eyes—well, I do not know what they are! They are all colours,’ said St. Claire.

‘All colours! That does not sound very charming,’ said Clarissa, with a little grimace.

‘Yours, at all events, do not leave themselves in doubt,’ said St. Claire, gallantly. ‘Yours are as blue as the heavens—as blue as forget-me-nots.’

‘But blue eyes are so ugly!’ said Clarissa, with girlish coquetry.

‘I think them beautiful,’ he answered.

‘As beautiful as yellow ones?’ she asked with a little laugh.

‘Surely,’ he answered, more flattering than truthful.

‘Well; perhaps it is better than being all colours, like a chameleon,’ she returned. ‘I am no chameleon in anything,’ she then added after a short pause, ‘neither in my eyes nor my character. Nony is.’



'Though there is a certain curious kind of resemblance between you I can scarcely say where it is; I think it must be that you both have at times a likeness to your father, and that you meet there; yet you are strangely unlike,' said St. Claire, rather suddenly, still looking at Ione, and from her to Clarissa.

'Of course we are,' she answered gaily. 'How should we be alike? And how should Nony be like father? How funny!' she added with a little burst of merriment that somehow jarred on St. Claire.

'Why not?' he asked with astonishment. 'You are sisters.'

Clarissa laughed again. She had been continually laughing during this conversation, and St. Claire, who was usually quite willing to idealize everything connected with any of his new friends, for the first time found himself irritated and oppressed.

'Has no one told you?' she asked, arching her eyebrows still more than nature had already arched them. 'Nony has not the remotest relationship to any of us,' she said emphatically. 'She is an orphan, the daughter of an old friend of father's—but she does not belong to us in any way. He took her when she was quite a little thing; gave her his name and brought her up as one of the family; because he and mother are so good; you do not know how good they are!'—she interpolated heartily; 'but she is not one of us, not the least in the world,' she repeated as emphatically as before.

She scarcely knew why she felt it to be such a satisfaction to say this to St. Claire. She had no conscious enmity to Ione; did not want to injure her with the handsome young doctor, or at least she did not think that she did; and yet she felt as if Providence had wrought in her behalf by giving her this opportunity of enlightenment, and that she ought to use it with thankfulness and despatch. She had been longing to tell St. Claire the truth about her sister by adoption. It was not to harm the girl, but to disabuse the man of an error; also in some sense to detach herself. She thought that he ought to know how things were at the Villa Clarissa. Every one in Palermo knew. Why not he with the rest?

Beside this question of truth which seemed to her of such paramount importance how about that patent fib concerning Mazzarelli? Clarissa was morally ashamed of Ione. That indolent and discontented nature; those profitless dreams and long hours of idleness; those fierce outbursts of jealousy—witness that cruel murder of the little bird—revolted the better ordered, more equable and sweet-tempered nature of Clarissa. And just as she felt that she must wash her pink soft hands when she had soiled them, so now she felt that she owed it to herself to repudiate Ione as a blood-relation whose character and conduct reflected on herself, or were derived from her parents.

She looked at her companion to see how her information affected him. An expression came into his face which she could not read. It might be pity or surprise, or something dearer, or something more repellent. She could not fathom it. And as he said nothing more lucid than a trivial 'Indeed!' she was no more helped by his voice than she had been by his eyes. She saw, however, that he looked at Ione with more interest of a kind—of what kind she could not say—than he had looked at her before.

Perhaps it was as well that she could not read the sudden keen desire which almost overpowered him—the passionate wish that possessed him—of doing something for the poor girl's happiness! From the first he had wondered why she seemed to be always in disgrace. Now he understood her isolation; and his heart yearned to help her.

So far Clarissa had not taken much by her cast. In thus separating Ione from the family she had concentrated St. Claire's sympathy, given a voice and a meaning to his pity and divided his interest.

How he pitied this poor lovely and unloved child! And how beautiful she was! Standing in that wonderful pose of hers, at once so graceful and so proud—her slender figure outlined against the purple sea and deep blue sky—the light wind catching her creamy skirts and blowing them back in cloud-like curves about her feet—the sun glistening on her shining red-gold hair as if it were a broken and interrupted aureole about her head—she might well have been some nymph or goddess of those old times of love and beauty, borne like a radiant dream on the sunshine of to-day; some nymph or goddess bearing the burden of humanity for the dream of love! How beautiful she was and, yes, he understood it all now, how isolated and unhappy! She made the third in the trinity of sorrow. Monica, himself, Ione; the first two wrecked because of the love which had been born and strangled at its birth; the third desolate because of the love which had never been born at all. Semblance for reality, charity for inheritance, sufferance for rights. Poor Ione! poor beautiful Ione!

The Marchese, his bright eyes sparkling, was showing her the treasures he had found in the sand; and she, wearied and preoccupied, devoured by jealousy and conscious only of hatred to all mankind, was not doing even her bad best to appear interested. For she had the defects of her qualities, and to the sincerity which would not feign joined that selfishness of pride which would not conceal.

Standing there, proud and weary, she looked across the intervening space to Armine. Their eyes met. They were at some little distance from each other, but they could see clearly though they could not hear. And looking thus, it seemed to him as

if she had called him to her, to her as if he had said: 'I love you.'

The pity which shone like tears in his soft eyes burnt into her heart like love; and she answered what she thought she saw by a look that half commanded and half besought. He felt impelled to go to her. At any cost of appearance, and at the certain risk of offending Clarissa, he felt that he must make her understand how much he pitied her. He was so sorry for her! and she was so beautiful! He did not believe what Clarissa had told him about the Marchese. Ione was not in love with him. He knew no more than this. Engaged or not, Ione Stewart was not in love with the Marchese Mazzarelli.

In two minutes he was by her side; and Clarissa was left looking for shells alone.

Ione smiled when St. Claire came up as she had not smiled the whole of this after-part of the day. She felt as if a soft mist had come down between her and the brazen sun, beneath which she had been burned and scorched, leaving her free to enjoy and be glad. The man whose devotion she coveted had obeyed her secret wish. He had left Clarissa for her, and so far her jealousy was appeased. But Clarissa, with crimson for blush-rose on her round fair face, tears in her blue eyes, and as much anger in her heart as her tranquil nature would allow, turned back over the sands to where her father and mother were sitting on the ridge, and, showing her shells as the ostensible reason of her return, said to her mother with an acridity unusual to her:

'Mother, I wish you would speak to Nony and tell her not to flirt so much as she does. Now with one and now with another—it really does not look nice! It does not seem to matter to her who it is so long as she has some one to pay her compliments and be silly with. And the Italians think it so odd, and say such disagreeable things of us English girls when they see us go on like this. I wish you would speak to her!'

'What has she been doing, my dear?' asked Mrs. Stewart, always just and wishing to be impartial.

'She has been flirting all the afternoon with the Marchese Mazzarelli, and now she has begun with Dr. St. Claire,' said Clarissa. 'And it looks so dreadful in such a young girl as she is! She will not mind a word I say, though I try to check her when we are together. But I think she goes on worse than ever when I speak to her. So do you speak to her yourself, mother. She must not be allowed to make herself so conspicuous!'

'I will, most certainly,' said Mrs. Stewart, severely; for, Ione apart, flirting was a thing of which she had a constitutional horror. And she felt quite as keenly as Clarissa the unfavourable impression given to the people among whom she lived, by the undue freedom, not to say worse, of certain of her younger com-

patriots. When it came to anything like indiscretion in her own family it was intolerable. To do her justice, she had been a model of carefulness in her up-bringing of the two girls; and she was essentially a pure and modest little woman for her own part.

'Go to her, Clarissa,' she continued after a pause, during which she had watched Ione standing between the two young men, and had seen how, in confirmation of her daughter's report, she turned her face to St. Claire and her shoulder to Mazzarelli. 'Tell her that I want her to join the Lancini girls; and if she will not, then send her to me.'

The Lancini girls were strolling over the sands accompanied by their father and mother, and a couple of handsome young Italians to pay them homage and make the day pleasant; but there was no possibility of a look or a word passing among them of which the authorities would not approve. Under such surveillance Mrs. Stewart felt that Ione would be properly restricted.

'We shall have to do something with that poor girl soon!' she said to her husband after Clarissa had left, her displeasure, like love, growing with what it fed on. 'That wretched blood of hers!' she added below her breath; and her husband wisely did not hear. All that he chose to hear he answered by saying, in his slow lazy way:

'Do not take things too seriously. Ione does not care a straw for Mazzarelli, and I am very sure that St. Claire does not care for her.'

'She would make him if she could, if only to take him from Clarissa,' said Mrs. Stewart, hastily.

'She cannot take from Clarissa what does not belong to her,' returned the Captain, with more caution than candour. 'St. Claire is a nice young fellow enough, but I will undertake to say he has no matrimonial projects in his head.'

'I do not know about that,' said Mrs. Stewart, demurely.

'If I thought so I should have to change my manners,' said her husband, bound by that queer unwritten law, in force among English fathers, to openly discourage the idea of potential sons-in-law even when secretly desired. And Mrs. Stewart, a little over-awed, let the conversation drop.

Clarissa went back to the trio and duly delivered her mother's message.

'Nony,' she said, trying to speak naturally and not quite succeeding; 'mother wants us to join the Lancini girls. We have left them alone too long, she says.'

'They do not want us,' answered Ione.

'Mother wishes it,' repeated Clarissa.

'Do you go then. Why should I? They are your friends, not mine. I do not care for them,' returned Ione.

'That is not the question. It is mother's wish,' again said

Clarissa. 'So, come Nony. Tell her to obey my mother, Marchese,' she said in Italian to Mazzarelli, as if his wish would be her sister's law.

'La Signorina Ione does not need my poor word to do what is right,' answered the young fellow, laughing.

'I do not wish to go,' said Ione, setting her lips.

'Come, Dr. St. Claire, let *us* go at all events,' said Clarissa, as her master-stroke; and with this she looked at the young doctor prettily, and made a few steps forward.

St. Claire looked at Ione, but her eyes were cast down on the sand, and her handsome face was as rigid as stone.

'Shall I carry your shells for you?' he said in his sweetest and most charming manner, touching the ends of the handkerchief which she carried, full of shells, by the four corners.

The faintest little smile stole over her face. It was not so much a smile as a tremulous kind of moral sunshine; but it expressed all, and conceded all.

'Thank you, yes; take them for me,' she said; and without another word turned with him and went up to the Italian ladies.

Her obstinacy had passed with her jealousy. St. Claire had identified himself with her, and she obeyed neither Mrs. Stewart, nor Clarissa, but him. As for the Marchese, she overlooked him as entirely as if he had not been in existence; and St. Claire thought that for a pair of lovers, as Clarissa had said they were, she was remarkably indifferent and he as remarkably cool. But he was more than ever convinced that his blue-eyed informant was wrong, and that Ione did not love Mazzarelli.

After this the day seemed to fade for more than one. A wind rose cold and strong, and the sun seemed to lose its power. The gods deserted the earth, and sea and sky, and wood and plain were once more tenantless of all that divine life, that glorious throng, which had possessed and peopled them in the early day. No one knew what had happened, but all felt that the spirit of the festa had died, and that only the body was left; and no one was sorry when the order to put to the horses was given, and the drive homeward began.

During that drive Ione was silent and concentrated; Clarissa was a little cross and pleaded headache; St. Claire was very sorrowful, held by two pains—one for Monica, and the other for Ione; the Stewarts were uneasy; and the Lancinis, though always amiable and sweet, were tired. The only person apparently at ease was the Marchese Mazzarelli, and his briskness was artificial. He had read the little drama aright, and though he knew that he could not marry Ione himself, and was not mad enough to be in love with her to no purpose, yet he did not like to see her open preference for another. He would willingly have flung this handsome young Englishman with the French name into the sea



as an offering to the infernal gods to whom he belonged—he would willingly have made a quarrel with him if he could. As he could not, he was exasperatingly good-tempered and bright, and talked all the way home, to no one's response.

Once on their way back, Ione raised her eyes to St. Claire's face in that sudden, swift, bewildering way of hers which seemed as if it took the very breath away of those at whom she looked. That look oppressed and haunted him. He could not read it. It was the look of a dumb creature asking for something it could not designate; of a soul in pain unable to express its sorrow; of a spirit in bondage within whose liberty lay such plenitude of power, such infinity of glory, and in whose imprisonment was such deadly pain. He was so deeply grieved for her! She had suggested Monica to him when he first saw her standing by the fountain in the sunshine; and ever since she had been somehow associated with that beloved image in his mind. How could he do her good? How could he make her happy? Ah, how indeed! The past gives no light by which the future may be discerned. If the mirror of the prophet hang behind him it is obscured and veiled. And Armine's unhappy love for Monica Barrington at Oakhurst was no guide to tell him how best to insure the well-being of Ione Stewart at Palermo.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### PLAYING WITH FIRE.

ST. CLAIRE was a man who might be trusted to keep out of temptation—to keep out of it better than he could withstand it when in it. But he was not a man to arrange circumstances for himself. He had no firm grip on life nor things anyhow;—a man of sensitive soul and tender conscience seldom has. So long as he kept from doing wrong he was content; he did not always trouble himself to make sure that he was doing wisely. The strongest characteristic about him was his patience, the most tenacious his affections, the most active his pity. He had eliminated from the roll-call of his moral qualities all that part of human nature which is sometimes called the savage and sometimes the animal; and he had not left alive in his soul the root of one ferocious passion, the outgrowth of one form of tyrannous desire, nor the smallest germ of the ordinary man's high-handed selfishness. Perhaps he had eliminated more than ferocity and selfishness. Be that as it may, he was eminently the kind of thing that women love as approaching nearer to themselves; and the dream of some among them is a race of men like Armine St. Claire, unselfish, loving, domestic, gentle, unsceptical and pure.

Pitiful as he was by nature, use had so far hardened him to the

sight of the physical pain inseparable from his profession, as to make his nerves steady and his skill more serviceable than his sympathies; but sorrow found him as soft as if he had been a woman, and the tragedy woven into the substance of Ione's life touched him profoundly. He mentally pictured all manner of helpful positions, and made up no end of schemes for her benefit, each one more unworkable than the other. He would have adopted her as his sister, if an unbelieving world would have accepted the relationship in its integrity, and neither have sneered on the one hand nor punished on the other. He thought of writing to Mrs. Barrington, begging her to ask her on a visit, when perhaps Edward Formby would be taken by her beauty, her grace, her charm, and end once for all his unsubstantial relations with Monica in the hard-and-fast fact of marriage with Ione. He tumbled out of the bag of his memory the names of all the lonely spinsters who would be so much happier if only they would adopt as a daughter a charming young creature with red-gold hair and amber-coloured eyes, given to fits of moody melancholy and to outbursts of violent jealousy. He worried himself into a couple of sleepless nights and an attack of fever on account of her; and Clarissa's clever revelation only drew him closer to the girl from whom it was sought to detach him. But he merely gave himself a headache, upset his digestion, shook his nerves, and made himself generally feeble, while he did no earthly good to Ione.

This desire to play Providence was as futile in his case as it has been in that of others; and he had to confess the sorrowful truth that each of us must dree his own weird as best may be, and that bearing one another's burdens is as difficult in fact as it is problematical in issue.

Then he went to the Villa Clarissa; and, because he was pitiful and sympathetic, he threw a great deal of superfluous tenderness into his manner, and his handsome eyes looked far more love than he felt. For it was not love that he felt for Ione; it was only love's mimetic kinsman, pity.

Coincident with the strengthening of his interest in Ione, that of the Stewarts in himself declined. They were disappointed in him, they said one to the other. They had believed him to have been a young man of good principles and refined tastes; but they saw now that he did not possess the latter, and they were beginning to suspect the former. They would have been as hard put to it to explain why they thought this, as if they had looked for snipe in a stubble field. But the reason why has very little to do with feeling, and logic and emotion are the vinegar and oil which, do what you will, never coalesce. The Stewarts, however, were too just and kind-hearted to turn an actively cold shoulder to St. Claire. They turned only one that was passively tepid; and, for the former warm and hearty hand, gave five limp and flabby fingers. Still,

it was as yet a change of spirit to be felt rather than one of programme to be read aloud as he ran along the way; and St. Claire, though sensitive, was unsuspicious, and constitutionally averse from finding flaws in others or causes of discomfort for himself.

Neither did he see, as any one else would have seen, that he was assigned to Ione—told off to her as her special property in the oddest way imaginable; and that she was assumed to be the sole cause of his coming to the Villa at all.

When he called, and she was not in the room, Mrs. Stewart would say to Clarissa, as soon as the first formal greetings were over:

‘Go and call Ione, my dear, and tell her that Dr. St. Claire is here.’ Or she would say to St. Claire himself: ‘Ione will be here directly. She has only gone out of the room for a moment.’

Once when the girl had driven into Palermo with the Captain, Mrs. Stewart put on a mournfully sympathetic face, as she said: ‘I am so very sorry! Ione has gone into town with my husband. She could not have expected you to-day, else I am sure she would not have gone; and I am afraid you will find your visit very uninteresting with only myself and my daughter to amuse you.’

‘No, do not say that, Mrs. Stewart,’ answered St. Claire, with genuine earnestness. ‘You know how pleased I am always to be here with you and Miss Stewart.’

On which the plump little pigeon took up the parable on her own account, and, with a flushed face that yet had no sweet softness in its colour, said, in a voice acrid for all its forced laughter: ‘Oh! how can you say that, Dr. St. Claire? I am sure not!’

‘You are sure not?’ he repeated with a little surprise; then he added with more gallantry: ‘And I am sure of just the contrary. An hour passed with you, Miss Stewart, and you’ (turning to Mrs. Stewart), ‘makes my day a veritable festa.’

‘Then what is it when Nony is at home?’ cried Clarissa, shrilly.

‘When your father and sister are at home?—a festa of superlative quality—“Est, Est, Est!”’ he laughed.

‘What a flatterer you are, Dr. St. Claire!’ said Mrs. Stewart, in her mildly peevish way.

‘Is confessing the truth flattery?’ he asked in his sweetest.

‘No, but making out that every one is so very precious to you—and always the one with whom you are, the most precious—that is flattery,’ she returned.

St. Claire looked grave, and his countenance perceptibly fell.

‘I am sorry you think so meanly of me as that,’ he said in a pained voice. ‘I was not aware that I was a flatterer, which to my mind is merely synonymous with being a hypocrite. I am only conscious of very strong affections for those who, like yourselves, touch my heart and inspire me with respect; and of as strong gratitude when people have been as kind to me as you have been.’

'But you make no distinction!' she objected. 'You are so desperately communistic in all your feelings. One person is just the same to you as another.'

'Surely not!' he said with energy. 'Here, in Palermo, no one is to me what you all are.'

'And you mass us all in a lump together!' said Mrs. Stewart, as if stating a grievance. 'You see no difference between us!'

'Oh yes, he does, mother,' said Clarissa, coming to the rescue with her wise little air. 'He likes Nony the best, don't you, Dr. St. Claire?'

'I like your sister very much indeed,' he answered. 'About liking her the best, I scarcely know what to say. I like you all so much, there is not a best among you, because there is not a worst.'

'Oh yes, there is,' said Clarissa, positive and amiable; and St. Claire let the matter drop.

He was conscious of breakers ahead; and he had no fancy for amateur shipwrecks.

Soon after this Ione and Captain Stewart came in, and St. Claire, troubled and a little embarrassed by the conversation, which had been substantially a bill of indictment against him, met the girl with less than his usual pronounced sympathy and admiration—not so much to shield himself from blame as to protect her. Ione caught the change of tone as swiftly as a mirror catches the reflection of the figure that passes before it.

'They have been speaking ill of me; they have prejudiced him against me; he has been paying compliments to Clarissa, and he does not care to see me; he is a wretch, and I hate him; and I do not care whether he likes to see me or not. I do not care for any one or any thing—but I wish I could kill St. Claire!'

Put into words, these were the sensations rather than connected thoughts which possessed Ione like angry demons—burnt and stung like fiery serpents—as she stood at a little distance from St. Claire, motionless as if struck to stone, with a face that might have been the face of a dead Fate, save for the palpitating nostrils and the quivering of the downcast eyelids.

'Are you tired, Ione?' asked Mrs. Stewart, watching her, but not quite comprehending what she saw.

'No,' said Ione, with an effort.

'Then sit down,' said Mrs. Stewart.

'I said I was not tired,' said Ione, disdainfully.

'Where have you been? Whom have you seen in Palermo?' asked Clarissa, in a chatty and amiable way.

'No one,' Ione answered.

'Not the Marchese Mazzarelli?' was the girl's next question, made with sympathetic interest.

'I said no one,' returned Ione.

'That was a pity,' laughed Clarissa, with meaning.

'Why?' asked Ione, suddenly raising her eyes flaming with scorn. 'I did not go to see any one. I went to shop, as you know.'

'Still, it would have made it pleasanter if you had seen some one,' said Clarissa, significantly.

'You might have thought so; I did not,' was her answer.

But in truth she had hoped to have seen St. Claire, and she had been disappointed at not having met him. Yet now, when she had found him, how strange and unlike himself he was! It was more pain than pleasure to see him; and she wished he had left before she had arrived.

How unhappy and unfortunate she was, she thought to herself. Some subtle poison always infected what might else have been her happiness, and reduced it to nothing. It was as if she had been marked out for special persecution by a malignant fate, determined to punish and torment her. This new friend of theirs—how strange it seemed to think of him as new; she could scarcely imagine what her life had been without him!—but this friend, whose kindness and sympathy had flung as it were a rainbow into her leaden sky, now he was passing into the dead dulness of the rest. He was becoming indifferent to her; withdrawing himself from her; turning from her to Clarissa. Was she never to have a friend of her very own? Was she always to be second to this girl, who, without giving her the love, usurped the privileges of an elder sister? How wretched she was!—and how hateful all men and women were!

She was startled out of her reverie of mingled jealousy and despair by Captain Stewart saying abruptly: 'Now that you are here, St. Claire, let us have a game at billiards. There will be time enough. Come, Clarissa—come, Io. Are you asleep?' he added to the latter sharply.

'I do not want to play,' said Ione, sullenly.

'Nonsense! Stuff!' said the Captain. 'Come.'

'Don't be so selfish, Nony,' said Clarissa. 'We all want to play. Why should you spoil our pleasure for your own selfishness?'

'Do as you are told, Ione,' said Mrs. Stewart.

'Why should I when I do not wish it?' asked Ione.

'It would be such a pity to spoil the game,' said St. Claire, in his soft voice and gentle way.

'The game would not be spoilt without me. Perhaps quite the contrary,' she returned, still sullen, jealous, unpleasant. 'Mamma, you can play,' she said, turning to Mrs. Stewart.

'You know I take a cue only when there is no one else. I do not care for it,' answered that lady rather crossly.

And indeed this was the truth. Standing for half an hour, with intervals of walking smartly round a table and leaning over the edge in uncomfortable angles, to strike a ball which never by any chance went where she had aimed and always did unexpected



things—caracoling to undesirable places and diving into pockets which seemed as if they had some special attraction for her balls in particular—all this was an amusement by no means to Mrs. Stewart's taste; and, as she said, she never played save when compelled by politeness and the laws of hospitality to make the fourth in a game which else could not be made without her.

'Oh, Nony, how tiresome you are! What a fuss you always make over every little thing!' said Clarissa, with a weary air, not to be wondered at considering the provocation. For indeed Ione was essentially tiresome when these fits of jealousy were on her.

Raising her eyes to look at her sister and slaughter her by their 'dynamic glance,' Ione caught St. Claire's by the way. He made the faintest little sign with his head, meaning 'yield' and 'come'; and with this sign he smiled as if sure that she would pleasure him by her obedience. This was the second time that he had undertaken the direction of her actions and the softening of her temper; and the second time that he had not miscalculated his power.

Her faced changed from its present sullenness as quickly as it had changed from its radiance of delight at seeing him to the gloom of disappointment and the hardness of resentment at his comparative coldness. The strain and tension of her lips relaxed; the angry light died out of her eyes; the dead whiteness of her cheeks and lips became less opaque, less vivid, and more as if the blood had left her heart, where it had all gathered, to flow once more naturally and easily through her veins. Then in the most gracious, the sweetest way possible, she turned to Mrs. Stewart, and said, as amiably as if she had been Clarissa herself:

'Poor mamma, I am sure I do not wish to annoy you. Of course I will play if you desire it.'

Her sudden outburst of unwonted amiability startled her family as if it had been a cry. The two women, and even the Captain—who naturally, as only a dense-witted man, had not the keener flair of these others—saw the motive and understood the reason why; while St. Claire thought, as he had thought more than once before: 'She is perfectly tractable if taken the right way. It is they who do not understand her, not she who is unmanageable.'

And thinking this, he 'peacocked himself' not a little on the deftness of his manipulation and the cleverness of his good generalship.

After this little scene the Stewarts gave up the young doctor more and more to Ione, and took ever less part in him themselves. This was not done as if they threw Ione at his head, or wished to make up serious relations between them. It was done in a half-disdainful, half-uncomfortable way, as if they had said: 'As this is your bad taste, take it and make the best of it you can. We hold ourselves superior to you and her and the whole sorry play going on before our eyes. We countenance your special interest in

this undesirable girl—if you have any special interest, and it is not all a show or sham—but we wash our hands of you; and do not care what becomes of you.’

And indeed this was the mental attitude of all three; for Clarissa, reasonable after the event and submissive to destiny according to the way of the lymphatic and amiable, had accepted her position as second to Ione with equanimity when once she had shed out all her tender feeling for St. Claire in one copious outburst of disappointed tears. Her normal dislike to her adopted sister had not greatly increased; and her tepid contempt for the young Englishman’s bad taste was perhaps but natural to a pretty girl who sees herself distanced by one not held to be her equal in good looks, social position, or moral conduct, in home attractions or matrimonial desirability. At all events there was no bitterness, no poison, in her feelings towards the two; and so far her philosophy was to her credit.

It was Mrs. Stewart rather than Clarissa who resented with bitterness the way in which things had gone; and if she did not make things so actively unpleasant for St. Claire that he could not visit at the house at all, it was only because she saw a chance of getting Ione well settled and off her hands for life; and between maternal jealousy and the prospect of relief, she cherished the latter rather than the former as the more paying investment of time and feeling.

As for Captain Stewart, he simply dropped his young countryman and handed him over to the women, as a poor creature not worth powder and shot. He was disappointed in him, he said; but he said no more; and his wife knew him too well to press on his reserve. There are things not to be dissected even between husband and wife; and this was one of them.

It was decidedly an uncomfortable position for St. Claire. These unexpressed displeasures and silent disappointments always are. But his sweetness of temper, his patience, the purity of his motives, together with his sincere gratitude for past kindnesses—in spite of that look and air of a disguised prince which made him appear to accept all homage as his due—carried him safely, and in some sense easily, through the ordeal; enabling him to take the rough with the smooth as of the appointed order of things. And as, fortified in his own heart by his inextinguishable passion for Monica, he was very far from intending to make love to Ione, he had no scruple in showing her attentions which, as has been said, were the offspring of compassion for her unhappy history, a desire to smooth away some of the worst angles of her uncongenial position, and a purely æsthetic kind of admiration for her beauty and originality.

‘I wish I could do something to make you happy,’ he said one day, as they were walking about the garden—the chief

pleasure at Villa Clarissa—well in view but out of hearing of Mrs. Stewart and her daughter, who were at some little distance behind them.

‘Thank you,’ said Ione, finding her words marvellously difficult of utterance.

It was strange how her voice all but failed her when she was alone with St. Claire, and how unpleasant it was to her to hear its tones so deepened and roughened when they did come; how still more unpleasant to be obliged to take long breaths before she could speak at all. She had never before experienced these sensations, and she was somewhat humiliated in her own mind to know that there lived any one in the world who could thus throw her off her balance and make her less than the absolute mistress of herself she always was when with others.

‘Your life here is evidently uncongenial to you,’ continued St. Claire, looking at her full of rash pity.

‘Yes,’ she said.

‘And you cannot change it?’

‘How can I?’ was her answer, made with that kind of patience which sounds so like disdain. ‘I cannot live on nothing; and they will not allow me to do anything which might support me.’

‘But indeed what could you do?’ he said, so far on their side.

‘A thousand things,’ she answered. ‘I could do what other girls do who have to get their own living—why not?’

‘You are not fit to go into the world alone,’ said St. Claire, thinking of her beauty.

‘Why not?’ she asked quickly, raising her eyes to his.

At this moment she was no longer embarrassed, no longer subdued and softened. St. Claire’s opposition to her cherished dream, his acceptance of that which she considered a wrong done to her and caressed as her standing grievance, chased away her gentler mood; and she was once more herself, stiffened to oppose and armed to resent.

‘You are too lovely,’ said St. Claire.

Her heart leapt with pleasure.

‘I am not,’ she said, with that false modesty which asks for further assurance—which craves reiteration of that dear praise.

‘You are the most beautiful girl I have ever known,’ said St. Claire.

An indescribable expression came into Ione’s face. It was not the soft submission of a loving woman, whose love is her honour and her lover her king—not the patient tenderness of a meek maiden accepting with gratitude and prepared to bestow without demanding—but it was the look of a queen who receives

with superb satisfaction the homage which yet she claims as her right. St. Claire's praises intoxicated her; but for all that they were her right.

'You are very good to say so,' she returned, in a lowered voice. But you forget Clarissa,' she added, in an altered tone.

'She is not equal to you, pretty as she is,' said St. Claire, ingenuously.

'Do you think her so very pretty?' she asked jealously.

'Very. She is charming for her type,' he answered. 'But her type is not equal to yours,' he went on to say, looking at his companion, as he had looked at her before, with eyes full of admiration.

'Would you tell her so if she asked you?' said Ione, with an unpleasant smile.

'Well, it would be difficult to tell her that,' he replied, also with a smile; but his was frank, and just a little playful, as if he were putting by the folly of a child.

'Then you would say the same things to her that you have been saying to me?' she asked, looking sideways through her narrowed lids.

'No, I should not,' was his reply. 'I could not, for I do not think it. It would not be true.'

'Truth has very little to do with the matter,' said Ione, 'every one tells stories.'

'Not every one,' he said gravely.

'Not you, when you flatter?'

'I do not flatter,' he replied.

'You have been flattering me just now,' said Ione, with a little laugh, not wholly pleasant nor wholly unamiable.

'No, I have only told the truth,' he said.

And then she looked at him with one of those sudden and wonderful looks which seemed to envelope him as if in a garment of fire—to dazzle his sight and take away his breath, and confuse his brain so that he could not think distinctly nor reason clearly.

'What strange power have you?' he said, after a moment's pause. 'Your eyes are worlds in themselves!'

'Are they?' she answered. 'Not very pleasant worlds, I fear!'

'Worlds where one gets lost—unfathomable, inexplicable.'

'Oh! the key is not very difficult,' said Ione, with affected indifference.

'I wish I had it,' he replied.

'Perhaps you have, if you cared to use it,' she said.

'I would use it if I knew I had it. I should like to understand you,' he returned.

'I am easily read.'

‘By what light?’

She hesitated; her eyes wandered a little aimlessly over the ground where they were cast. She could not say what she thought: ‘By the light of love—the light of homage—the light of confessing my supremacy and submitting to my domination;’ but after a time she drew her thoughts together under a more befitting veil, and answered: ‘By the light of common sense and a little sympathy.’

‘I hope I have the former—I know I have the latter,’ said St. Claire. ‘Yet I do not understand you.’

‘I thought you did,’ she answered, with a changed face.

‘Not your eyes when you look like that,’ he said.

‘Then you have less sympathy than you think you have,’ she answered, with somewhat harsh frankness. ‘There is nothing about me or my eyes so very inexplicable if you cared to understand.’

‘But I do,’ he said. ‘I do wish both to understand and help you.’

She turned to him with the sweetest graciousness.

‘The very wish helps me,’ she said softly. ‘My life is so lonely that any words of sympathy are pleasant.’

‘You have all mine,’ was his reply, made just as the two ladies, cutting across the garden, came face to face upon them at the angle where the lavender-walk intersected the rose-border.

All his what? Both mother and daughter heard the words, and discussed them between themselves with some anxiety and more curiosity. All his love?—all his hope?—what did he mean? What had they been saying to each other? It was of no use to ask Ione, and they could not question him; but things seemed to be coming to a crisis somehow; and perhaps the hope, now that Clarissa had thrown him over, of St. Claire’s freeing them of Ione, was nearing fulfilment. Meanwhile Ione herself pondered on his words, his looks, his manner, the tones of his voice, the very movement of his hands. And the result of all was that vague kind of hope, rather than confessed belief, of a woman who has not yet heard the beloved speak of love—that atmosphere of dumb passion which means: ‘He loves me, and he will one day tell me so.’

It was playing with fire in truth. And the end of it all? Her destruction, or his own? and the bonds which bound him to sweet, dreamy Monica burnt like tow in the flame?



## CHAPTER XIX.

## AT LAST!

SOME days after this they were all once more in the grounds of the Villa Clarissa—sitting under the carruba-tree which stood in the centre of the rose-garden. For three days the scirocco had been blowing, and the nerves and health of every living thing in the island had been severely tried. Frays had been rife among the populace, quarrels had been the rule of life in all the homes; children had cried with more unappeasable insistence than usual; women had shrieked with shriller voices and heaped insults on each other's heads with wilder gesticulation; men had yelled with more fury in their passion, more pungency in their words, more ready recourse to the knife and freer threats of the revolver; while the more refined and self-controlled of the educated classes had moped or snapped or sulked according to their natures, and made themselves and all about them as uncomfortable as it was in their power to do.

St. Claire, always sensitive to weather, had been depressed and ailing. He had not left the hotel, but had sat in his own room stripping the healthy skin from his healing wounds; dreaming of Monica and accusing Providence by his grief; fretting about lone and plaguing himself with impracticable desires and unprofitable schemes for her benefit; making all his molehills into mountains full of sharp rocks and deep abysses; and going through a whole world of unnecessary anguish as his participation in the general disturbance of men and things, because the wind blew from the south-east and brought with it some of the poison and torpor of the desert.

To-day, however, the whole atmosphere was changed. The wind blew fresh and clear from off the sea, and the irritability and nervous exhaustion of the last seventy-two hours had passed like a bad dream.

It was now the middle of March, and the garden was full of fragrant scents and lovely growths. The walls of the house were still crimson with bougainvillea and perfumed by climbing roses, while heliotrope, lavender, rosemary, and geraniums, all in large bushes rather than plants, mingled with mignonette and orange-blossoms in one rich chord of fragrance which carried a kind of intoxication to the senses. Birds were singing in the trees; iridescent flies were darting through the air; gorgeous butterflies and softer moths were fluttering like rootless flowers blown hither and thither by the fresh wind; the sky was a pure unclouded blue where was never a stain—not veiled and softened, not full of dreamy suggestion and tender languor as it sometimes is, but

stimulating, productive, energising—a sky, a sun, an air which seemed to mock all sorrow, to dry all tears, and to spur the blood to the gorgeous madness of hope, the exulting insanity of joy. Surely there was not a melancholy line, not a saddened scene in the whole drama of human history! Surely all men were strong, all women lovely, all hearts loving and beloved on such a day as this!—a day which had for its whole essence happiness, and for all its circumstances beauty.

How good it was to live here in this fair and fruitful Palermo—this pearl in the heart of the Golden Shell! How delicious to drink in delight with every breath that brought the very entrancement of existence—the very ecstasy of being! How all the grief of the past was forgotten, and only the consciousness of the radiant present remained! It was as if pain had been transformed to pleasure—as if the elements of sorrow had been taken to form the substance of joy.

And how beautiful Ione looked, sitting in that curule-shaped garden-chair—sitting in that motionless and graceful way of hers, which was at once so proud and so seductive! St. Claire sat on a lower seat, seemed almost at her feet, and Clarissa took credit to herself in that she was too good-natured to say so, and thus spoil the picture and the suggestion.

They had been sitting here for some time, with sundry of the servants coming about them on trivial pretexts of business, but in reality like children eager to have a share in the small family festa going on beneath the carruba-tree. Of them all, Vincenzo was the most incessant and the most persistent. Now he came to bring the ladies flowers—whereof Mrs. Stewart had the largest number; but surely Ione's were the most choice, and Clarissa's the most ordinary!—now he came to speak to the padrone on some perfectly unimportant matter, which he would have dilated on till he had lengthened it out into the parley of an hour, had not the Captain stopped him with military abruptness and as much frankness, telling him he was a 'ciuce' for his pains and 'che diavolo!'—what did he want? Repulsed or not, however, he always came back to the group beneath the carruba-tree, and always stood where he could best see Ione sitting like a fair and youthful Agrippina, her clasped hands resting lightly on her knees, her eyes now cast down and now looking straight before her into space, or sometimes stealing brief glances at Armine St. Claire, as is the way with women who feel more than they have confessed, and who love, unbidden of the beloved.

The conversation turned on the *mafia*, which Captain Stewart held as only the tacit convention of certain men to despise the intervention of the law, and to be their own avengers. According to him, it was nothing but the Corsican vendetta under Sicilian conditions; as thus: if A. were injured or murdered, and B.

were known to be the person who had done the crime, A., or his family, would not deliver B. up to justice to be dealt with according to law, but they would bide their time, take their measures, and execute judgment with their own hands. This, and this only, was the *mafia*, he said; and people who talked about a secret society, or secret subsidies to brigands to be held harmless of aggression, talked a world of nonsense and did not know what they said.

Had he said all this to a person who knew Palermo, it would have been confirmation of the whispered suspicion that Captain Stewart was a *mafioso* himself, and that he owed his immunity from trouble to his punctual payments of black-mail. Men get into the habit of suspicion in this beloved Italy, where the impress of the old hand of tyranny still lies on the flesh of the nation, and where, in consequence, words are held as valuable masks for thoughts; but as Armine did not understand more than the merest surface of things, he accepted what he heard in its simplicity, and thought it all very straightforward and intelligible.

From the *mafia* and the *mafiosi*, the talk drifted on to the condition of the poor—the wages they received; the food they ate; the dwellings in which they lived; and then on to the strange mixture of servility and familiarity in their manner, and the cleverness which comes by gift of nature to almost all. And specially the Stewarts dwelt on the facility with which a man can turn his hand to anything; so that your gardener can be your cook, and your cook can be your valet, while your valet makes up your old clothes into new suits for himself as well as if he were a professional tailor, and the tailor buds your roses and cooks your maccaroni with no more trouble than he has when he cuts out your coat.

‘This Vincenzo now,’ said Captain Stewart, ‘he is simply invaluable. He can do everything, and he will do anything he is asked. The fellow has no pride or nonsense, and he is my right hand in all ways. I do not know how I should get on without him, ugly dog as he is; though I take care not to let him know that he is worth more than a pinch of snuff to me. If I did, he would become insolent and try to be my master. You have to keep your foot on their necks if you don’t want their knuckles in your own throat.’

‘You mean they are slaves,’ said St. Claire, quietly.

‘Substantially, yes,’ said Captain Stewart. ‘Centuries of misrule have moulded them into what they are, and the effect of these centuries is not to be overcome in one generation.’

‘You are sure he does not understand English?’ asked St. Claire, looking at Vincenzo, who was standing there, cap in hand as usual, surveying the group in the amiable manner of his race.

In spite of the broad smile which showed that unbroken row of small shark-like teeth, there was something in the glittering eyes and observant look of the man which always disturbed St. Claire. He had distrusted him from the first, and he distrusted him even more as time went on, and his first impressions deepened rather than wore away.

'What an idea! Vincenzo understand English? No!' said Mrs. Stewart, a little peevishly. 'What a horrible suggestion, Dr. St. Claire! You had better call him a *mafiose* at once!'

The Captain laughed.

'No, he is neither a *mafiose* nor an Admirable Crichton,' he said. 'He is only a poor devil who ought to be a gentleman, for he is the son of a count, the grandson of a duke, the nephew of a prince, and I don't know what beside; but he is penniless, as so many of them are; so he is my servant instead. Still, he is of good family, so far as that goes, and he answers my purpose admirably.'

'And being a gentleman by birth, of course he is more high-minded than the rest?' said St. Claire.

'Well, I don't know about that,' drawled the Captain. 'I cannot say that he is quite honest on his own account—none of these fellows are—but he would not let any one else rob me of a lira.'

'I should not quite relish his own dishonesty, however careful he might be of my interests with others,' said St. Claire, taking his stand on the British ideal.

'Oh, you are too precise for us!' said the Captain, with a fine shade of irony. 'In Sicily, I can tell you, you must take what you can get, and be thankful it is no worse.'

'It might be better by all accounts,' said St. Claire.

'We cannot have perfection anywhere,' returned the Captain, on the defensive for the sake of opposition.

'We might try for improvement,' said St. Claire.

'At least we have no strikes, no wife-kicking, no drunkenness,' the Captain answered with an aggressive drawl, making Armine responsible for all the sins in Great Britain.

'But more general crime and less truthfulness,' said St. Claire.

The Captain shrugged his shoulders.

'We put up with it,' he said with affected indifference. 'And as we get used to it we understand it better than in the beginning, and are not taken in by it. Their flatteries and promises of mountains and seas, and pleasant little tarradiddles out of pure complaisance and kindness—it is only a way they have. All nations have their ways. The main thing is to understand them so as not to be caught by them.'

'I do not think I could ever get accustomed to want of truth and honesty,' returned St. Claire, tenacious to his point.

'Then do not live in Italy,' said the Captain, curtly.

'No, I never shall,' said St. Claire, simply.

'I am sure I would rather have this civil, obliging, good-natured, and perfectly respectful Vincenzo about us than any of your insolent English creatures,' said Mrs. Stewart, with an odd little outbreak.

To fall foul of anything purely Britannic at this moment was like laying a few stripes on St. Claire's shoulders, and it soothed her to find a whipping-boy of any kind.

'Would you?' he asked, sweet and amiably obtuse. 'I would not. I would rather have more truth and less cleverness—more independence and less sweetness of manner in those who served me.'

In saying which he was perfectly innocent of all suspicion that he might be condemning himself.

But his host looked at him sharply, and said in his slow deliberate way:

'I should not have thought you would have found fault with sweetness of manner, St. Claire, or would have preferred blunt honesty to gracious—what shall I say?'

'I should say flattery,' said Mrs. Stewart.

Clarissa laughed. Ione's straight dark eyebrows met above her eyes in a heavy frown.

'No, I do not flatter,' said St. Claire, with unruffled amiability. 'To show when you like people and to say openly that you admire them—that is not flattery.'

'But you cannot admire every one so very much as you say you do,' said Mrs. Stewart, as she had said once before. 'You must flatter some among them!'

'I do not know which they are,' he answered, smiling. 'I am sure it is not any one here!' he added pleasantly.

At this moment Vincenzo, who had been gone for some few minutes, suddenly reappeared from the back of everything—coming among them with that quiet stealthy tread which never made itself heard till he was fairly in the midst of them, and then only because he purposely scraped his feet on the gravel. His eyes were very bright, and his breath came thick as if he had been running, but his wide mouth smiled as usual, and his manners were also as usual—good-humoured, familiar, obliging, and subservient. He told the padrone that he was wanted in the office; and Captain Stewart, on rising, looked back to St. Claire, and for all his displeasure with the disguised prince who had disappointed him, said hospitably: 'Don't go yet, St. Claire. I shall be back directly.'

'That man of yours may be a good fellow, as you say, but I confess I do not like his looks,' said St. Claire, as the master and his man moved away.

'We do not choose our servants for their beauty,' said Mrs.



Stewart. 'If they do our work well we do not care whether they are plain or handsome.'

'But I dislike the man's face not so much because he is so exceedingly plain—and really I think he is the ugliest fellow I have ever seen—as because it is of such a low type. He does not look straight at you when he speaks. He seems to do so, but he does not. And when he does his eyes are like a tiger's. They are so fierce and with such a strange yellow light about the rim of the iris.'

'He is as good as any of them,' said Mrs. Stewart, crossly, 'and it would be a pity to prejudice my husband against him. He is so useful that we should be quite lost if we had to part with him.'

'I should be sorry to do that,' returned St. Claire, gently.

'But finding incessant fault with him and calling him ugly and of a bad type is not exactly the way to make any one satisfied,' said Mrs. Stewart, with her disagreeable smile. 'You seem to have taken quite a prejudice against the poor fellow from the very beginning,' she added fretfully.

'I hope not!' he answered.

'Perhaps saying hard things of him is your way of showing favour,' she returned.

St. Claire looked perplexed. He could not understand this decided change of front in one whom he had been accustomed to consider his maternal Palermitan friend. He had become so used to be a favourite among the Stewarts that it was almost like hearing a foreign language to catch that frosty accent, to hear that fretful voice; and he looked at his hostess with his beautiful eyes as if asking her with pain what she would have him to understand.

Ione turned paler than usual, and for a moment seemed about to speak; but she did not. She only shot out one glance to Mrs. Stewart which seemed to warrant all that has ever been said of the fabled basilisk; then lowered her lids and drew her lips into a thin line, her breath coming a little fast as Vincenzo's had done. Clarissa for her part smiled in an inane and amiable way, as if she were not conscious of the sting and was only amused by the paradoxical humour of her mother's words.

And soon after this Mrs. Stewart, still nursing her vague wrath against the young fellow who in the beginning of things had been so nice, got up from her seat saying to her daughter: 'Clarissa, come with me, my dear; I have to speak to Amarella.' Turning to St. Claire she repeated her husband's words: 'Do not go yet, Dr. St. Claire. We shall be back directly. I merely have to give an order to the maid. Ione will entertain you till we return,' she added as her own coda, not in the original theme.

With this she put her hand on her daughter's arm and the two

went slowly through the roses and the flower-beds towards the house.

And when they were fairly out of sight Ione drew a deep breath and looked at St. Claire with her rare and wonderful smile, her eyes dilated, soft, dark, seeming to say in audible words: 'How good it is for us to be here together and alone!'

How beautiful she was, and how perfectly she fitted in with her surroundings! St. Claire looked at her with admiration, with æsthetic enthusiasm, with artistic satisfaction, even with professional appreciation and critical content. So young, so full of life, so healthy, so vigorous, and withal so refined! It was the nervous grace of an Arabian thoroughbred; the sensitive charm of a young gazelle; the superb power of a sleek-skinned couching panther; it was the freshness of a flower just opened to the morning before culmination has been reached and after immaturity has been passed; it was the effulgence of the gem ere use has dimmed its lustre; it was maidenhood in its most resplendent moment, when, no longer childish, it is not yet completed womanhood. And of this resplendent moment Ione was the most enchanting and the most perfect product.

Set against the leaves as both background and frame, with the sunlight falling in one narrow line across her head and shoulder, she sat there silent as was her wont, motionless as was her wont, and yet not inert. Hers was the silence of intensity, the motionlessness of expectation. She was like one of the old-time nymphs waiting for her god to come to her. It was not for her to seek, not even for her to meet. She had only to wait; to answer when he should call, to greet him when he should arrive, to receive him with glad acceptance of his love, and to give all her own for everlasting in return for his divine grace of a moment.

After the thin acridity of Mrs. Stewart and the mindless cheerfulness of Clarissa it was restful and refreshing to be with this beautiful Galatea who assumed to be a statue and who was so true a woman. All her potentialities of fire and fury, of sullenness and of jealousy, as well as all her possibilities of passionate devotion, of the very sublimity of self-immolation for love's sake, were veiled but not hidden beneath that eloquent silence, that mask of repose; and St. Claire felt to his inmost being the presence of the passion he dared not analyse, of the power he could not match.

But if he had neither passion nor power to match Ione's, the affectionate sympathy as well as the poetic sentiment of his own nature was fully awakened and keenly alive. He pitied her as a human being, admired her as a woman, loved her as a sister. The time, the place, the whole surroundings were divine, full of spiritual intoxication, of subtle sensuous charm. He felt as if he should never forget the richness of beauty, the strange depth of

tenderness which made this moment like one snatched from Heaven and the gods. It was a new experience to him, and called up something within him which even Monica had neither roused nor taught.

But at this moment he had forgotten Monica, and the world held only Ione as the supreme creation of the summer sunshine.

'I shall think of this place for ever, of this moment and you. When I leave I shall carry it as a picture always with me,' he said abruptly.

Ione started when he spoke and looked at him with almost terror in her eyes.

'You are not going away?' she said, in a low voice.

'Yes, soon—I must,' he answered, and wondered why he found his voice so difficult to control.

She turned away her face. She knew that it was pale and full of distress, and she did not wish him to see it.

'I am sorry to leave,' he continued, after a pause. 'You have all been so good to me. I shall grieve to leave you.'

'We have done nothing,' said Ione, always in that low, half-suffocated voice.

'You have made my whole life here,' he answered.

She looked down on him, sitting as it were at her feet, and the sudden flash of her eyes bewildered and disturbed him as of old. Then she dropped her broad lids as she plucked the petals off a rose grasped in her long white hand.

'I wish I were going to England too,' she said. 'I hate Sicily—I hate the Italians!'—she added fiercely.

The leaves of the thick edge of myrtle and monthly rose behind them stirred suddenly as by a passing wind, or as if a large bird had flown heavily through the branches.

'Yet you are Italian in all but your colour,' said St. Claire, meaning to please her by the ascription of beauty.

'Do not say that!' she cried. 'I am English—pure English—English all through!'

'Yes? Then the sun has moulded you into the beauty of your adopted country,' he said, looking at her with intense admiration and speaking in a voice like a caress.

She looked again at him as she had looked before—gathering up the praise, deprecating the connexion.

'You know that I am not a real daughter here?' she then said; 'that I do not really belong to papa and mamma?'

'Yes,' he answered.

'Who told you?' she asked.

'Your sister.'

'Sister!' she repeated, raising her head; 'I have no sister—I have no one—no father nor mother—no brother—no friend—nothing in the whole world.'

'One friend—one always in me,' said Armine. 'Remember—one always in me,' he repeated.

'Thank you,' she answered, bending lightly towards him.

A petal of her half-shattered rose fell on his upturned face. She had raised the flower to her lips as she bent, and it rested on his face warm with the touch of hers.

He took it in his hand.

'I will keep this for ever,' he said tenderly. 'It will remind me of this hour, this place, and of you—always of you.'

Again he looked at her full of admiration, of sympathy, of poetry, of feeling; and again she turned away her face—not troubled this time, but too eloquent of something which it was due to maidenly pride to conceal.

The little line of sunlight had shifted its course, and now fell across and through the fringe of curls at the back of her neck. Oh that betraying sunlight and that subtle scent of rose and heliotrope which came from her fair young breast! Oh the songs of the birds, and the heavy odour of the orange-blossoms like an unseen cloud in the clear blue air!—and oh for the weakness of human nature, and the folly of a man who drifts through sentiment and is wrecked on the sunken rocks of poetry! Not savage nor animal—only sweet and loving and tender and weak; not able to control circumstances, nor grasping life with a firm hand as a man should—only able to steer clear of the current when on the alert, but carried by the tide where it would when he let himself go—where was St. Claire now?—this man made after the model of a woman's mind and according to the dream of woman's fancy?

Her head was turned away; her heart was throbbing, till it made the flowers in her bosom palpitate as if with sentient life; her whole being was possessed and overmastered by a soft delicious trouble. And he—the influence of the moment overcame him. Nature and poetry, sense and compassion, were leagued against his better wisdom and stood between him and his truer self. With an impulse he could not control he raised himself from his sitting posture, and, with one knee on his low seat, put his hands on the arms of Ione's chair and kissed the side of her neck—there where the red-gold curl caught the yellow shine of the golden sun.

She turned and looked at him, her whole body quivering as if under an electric shock. Her eyes seemed to dazzle him with their strange unearthly light, and his seemed to her as the eyes of a god—loving, compassionate, divinely beautiful, and unfathomable as the source of life itself.

She laid her hands on his shoulders.

'You have come at last!' she said in a low soft voice like the very sigh of happiness. 'Oh love! my love! at last!'

## CHAPTER XX.

## IN THE TOILS.

CAUGHT!—caught by the tide and swept away by the current; seduced by his amiability, by his weakness, by his pity, by his love; caught as hopelessly as is a swallow by bird-lime; allured as destructively as is a moth by the candle; attracted as by a magnet against his better judgment, his clearer will, his secret wish; caught, to be held as in a vice by those white young arms, fettered in the tangles of that red-gold hair, imprisoned in the depths of those lustrous eyes; caught, never to be free again, not though he should break his heart for remorse because of his infidelity and for pain because of his captivity;—yes, St. Claire was fairly taken in the net which Ione's sorrowful history had first woven, and his own weakness to pity finally closed, round him; and he would never be his own man again.

At Oakhurst, where he must return, lived Monica Barrington, in whose heart all his real love lay hidden. But he stood here in the sunlight in Palermo as the accepted lover of Ione Stewart; and he had not the moral courage to tell her that—time and space, flesh and spirit, the senses and the imagination, conspiring against him—his caress had been of impulse, not of design, the result of a moment's indiscretion and not the deliberate expression of an honest man's deliberate choice.

Poor St. Claire! and, had she known, poor Ione! But she did not know. She, like all who love, created her own god and built up her own heaven. Her mind saw what it brought and worshipped what it made; and she never stopped to ask if the love and devotion with which she credited St. Claire were things which were, or things which she believed because she wished them to be.

How happy she was! Love had transformed her sorrowful sufferance of days to joyful mastery of life, and had given her a new moral being. Radiant and assured, she was no longer moody as of old. She had no more outbursts of jealous rage, no more spells of sullen silence, no more impatient dreams of impossible release from her uncongenial surroundings. She was now brighter than Clarissa, inasmuch as the sunshine is brighter than the moonlight; and even an enemy could scarcely have grudged the happiness which made her not only so infinitely more beautiful, but also so supremely fascinating and so amiable. How happy she was! For the first time in her life she was loved;—so she thought and believed, and belief is the same as knowledge;—loved as she loved,



loved for herself and beyond all others. Hitherto she had been a pauper in the great world of love, seeing others enjoy the wealth which she was denied; now she was endowed more richly than the rest, and to the utmost of her desire. Hitherto she had been no one's special care; now she was an adored man's very heart and soul and centre of delight, his whole source of happiness, his whole treasure of joy. What more had she to ask of fate or fortune? Nothing; save length of days for the full enjoyment of this bliss.

And all the time the whole thing was a delusion, and those Gardens of the Blessed wherein she walked were nothing but a mirage created by love and maintained by self-deception.

Too confident to be afraid of delusions, too happy to be clear-sighted, Ione gave herself up to the enchantment which she herself thus wove about her life. All that she had ever pictured of blessedness was now fulfilled, and nothing disturbed her belief in her sure possession. She loved and was beloved. Let all the rest go as the dust which falls from the diamond when the crowning facet is being cut!

It was very different with St. Claire. The responsibility of worldly matters, and that, far more important, of the truth of things, rested with him; and he knew what Ione did not. And, first, there was that humiliating question of ways and means to be dealt with, and that terrible wolf hovering on the horizon to be shown as an all-too certain visitor to the house-door in the future. It was not a pleasant moment for him when he had to explain to Captain Stewart the poverty-stricken character of his schedule; and how, for all his foolish action which had let loose the flood and set fire to the wood, he was absolutely unable to keep a wife, unless she had money on her own side. And he knew that Ione had none. But it had to come. Sooner or later the truth had to come out; and when the Captain, in his quality of guardian, demanded an explanation, St. Claire, in his character of lover, had to give it, and to stand the brunt of the blow to follow.

Captain Stewart was intensely annoyed by the whole affair. He was annoyed to find that his estimate of St. Claire's social position, as represented by his cash-box, was false; and that, so far from being a prince in disguise, he was little better than a pauper in masquerade; annoyed that this pauper should have committed Ione to an engagement when he had no substantial home to offer, damaging her future chances by just so much of the fine down as is rubbed off a girl's repute by a confessed betrothal brought to naught; annoyed that the truth had not been told from the beginning, when he might have better controlled the intercourse between themselves and this handsome young Lazarus dressed in the robes of Dives, and thus have kept his own out of danger; annoyed that he, the careful father of a prize daughter, should ever have been so far imposed on as to imagine the possibility of an

alliance between his pearl Clarissa and this very profitless pebble from the waste lands of fortune ; annoyed with everything, from beginning to end ; and therefore, being annoyed, he was disagreeable and unsympathetic.

‘ I should be sorry to take her into poverty,’ said St. Claire, looking handsome and penitent after he had made his unpleasant confession and tabulated the humiliating score of his finances.

‘ You should have thought of that before,’ said the Captain, speaking with vicious deliberation ; and St. Claire answered meekly :

‘ I own that I have done wrong. I should, as you say, have thought of all that before.’

‘ But now what do you intend to do ? ’ asked Captain Stewart, in the tone of one to whom the whole thing was perfectly indifferent. ‘ Are you going on with the engagement ? ’

‘ I have not fortune enough to marry on,’ said St. Claire.

‘ Then you will break it off ? ’

‘ What else can I do ? I have no home fit for your daughter to go to,’ he answered.

‘ You must tell that to Ione yourself,’ said Captain Stewart, knowing the nature of the task imposed.

‘ I am so sorry to give her pain ! ’ Armine rather sighed than said.

‘ According to your own account of things it has to come,’ returned the Captain coldly. ‘ Sooner or later she has to learn that you do not intend to marry her.’

‘ That I cannot,’ said St. Claire.

‘ Which comes to the same thing,’ replied the other.

‘ My miserable folly ! ’ said Armine with a groan, his fingers drumming nervously on the table.

‘ It is rather late in the day to bemoan that,’ said the Captain grimly. ‘ What you have to do now is to redeem your word like a man, or break it like a man. To sit there weakly bewailing your folly is the act of a woman ; and calling yourself a fool does not excuse you for having been one ! ’

His contempt was sharp and wounding ; but it was wholesome, in that it roused St. Claire, and spurred him to some show of self-defence.

‘ No man is proof against a moment’s weakness,’ he said, with a certain kind of angry dignity that became him.

‘ Evidently, if there are such men, you are not one of them,’ returned the Captain contemptuously.

‘ You are hard on me, Captain Stewart.’

‘ Because I despise your weakness ? Would you have me admire what will cost that poor girl more than I care to think of ? ’

‘ I will trust to her generosity to forgive me, and to her common sense to see things rationally,’ said St. Claire.

‘ Va bene,’ replied the Captain drily. ‘ I hope you will find

what you look for. But we have high authority for saying that reeds when they are leaned on have the trick of breaking and piercing the hand which trusts them.'

'Ione must see for herself that she cannot share my poverty. You yourself would not permit it,' said St. Claire at bay.

'Do not mix me up in the affair,' said the Captain sternly. 'It is your own affair.'

'And yours,' persisted Armine.

'No, not mine in any way,' said the Captain. 'I do not forbid the marriage, and I do not desire it; I throw no obstacle in the way, and I make nothing smooth. If you choose to take the girl, penniless as she is, and begin the battle of life together, you may. Others have married on meagre allowance and thriven well after; and there is no reason why you should not do the same if you wished it. But I do not counsel it—as little as I forbid it. You and she must settle it between you.'

'It is impossible!' said St. Claire.

Captain Stewart shrugged his shoulders.

'You are master of the situation—that is, so far as Ione allows you to be,' he said, with exasperating dryness. 'Her hand is rather a tight one when she closes it.'

'I understand you, Captain Stewart; and I accept the whole responsibility,' said Armine, feeling that he made no way here, and indeed was only losing time, strength, and patience in the struggle.

And with this he rose and went out to Ione, waiting for him under the shade of the carruba-tree in the rose-garden, feeling that he carried her death in his hand, and in his own heart the consciousness of sin from which, come what might, he should never be free again. Bound or released, he had done that which he could not undo; and, end as the thing might, some one must suffer;—all because of his weakness to pity, and the seduction of nature and the senses to which he had yielded for that brief but fatal moment.

The day was just as beautiful as that on which he had abandoned the guidance of reason to drift rudderless on the treacherous sea of impulse and emotion. But how changed everything was for him! Nature had lost her spell, and the influences created by sun and shadow, by the songs of the birds, the scents of the flowers, the voices of the day, were as different now from what they had been then as sobriety is different from intoxication, remorse from passion, death from life. Even Ione, sitting in exactly the same place and pose on that curule-shaped garden-chair, was not the Ione of that fatal day. She, like Nature, had lost her charm; and the broken spell no longer worked. The sun shone in that narrow line across her head and neck, and touched the red-gold hair with shining yellow; but St. Claire had no inclination now to kneel on the seat by her side and kiss that living

tracery. He only wondered how he had ever suffered himself to be caught by so slight a thing ; and for the first time in his life he despised himself as having done that which he would not have done had he had the self-control which had been his safeguard in Oakhurst.

And yet, how sorry he felt for the poor girl, knowing as he did what was to come ;—how miserably guilty when he saw the exquisite smile of loving happiness that broke like sunlight over her face as he drew near and she, without rising but bending forward, held out both her hands to him, palm upwards, as if it were the offering of herself and her very soul made to that great god Love ! He saw all her love ; all her confidence in him and her future happiness ; all her trust and joy and glad security ; and he knew that he was about to destroy her whole life as her reward for loving him and believing in him.

He went up to her sadly ; and despite the blinding fervour of her passion, the sensitiveness of her love told her that danger was before her.

‘Are you well ?’ she asked anxiously.

‘Yes—no—not too well—not much amiss with me,’ he answered in confusion.

‘Something is wrong—what is it ?’ asked Ione, in a soft, sweet, sympathetic manner—so unlike the arid egotism of the past.

‘Something is indeed very wrong,’ said St. Claire.

She opened her large eyes and looked at him, not in fear, rather in defiance of all evil possibilities that should come between them—given his life and her own.

‘What is it ?’ she asked again. ‘Has papa been unkind ?’

‘Not that so much as that I have been foolish,’ returned Armine.

She turned as white as the datura in her hand.

‘What have you done ?’ she asked, her head bent down ; then she raised it and looked at him full of love and confidence. ‘You cannot have done anything wrong or foolish !’ she said, with a sudden abandonment of suspicion for love. It was like a caress—as if she had put her arms about his neck and kissed him on the lips.

‘Yes, both wrong and foolish,’ persisted poor St. Claire. ‘I have made you love me, Ione, and I have no means on which to marry.’

He said this with a headlong rush, strange for one so sweet and measured as he always was. It was as if he had flung himself off the firm land and dashed himself into the depths where he knew neither his probable foothold nor his ultimate destination.

‘You have made me love you, and you have no means on which to marry ?’ repeated Ione slowly. ‘Are you very poor ?’

She asked this as calmly, almost glacially, as if she were not

interested; as if it were of some one else, not herself, of whom she was speaking.

‘Yes, very poor. I have nothing,’ he answered.

‘You have a profession and a home,’ she said.

‘A profession which gives me a bare subsistence, and a home which is not fit for you to share,’ was his reply.

‘If fit for you it is for me. Where you are I can be. And I can help you in your work,’ said Ione, raising her eyes to his.

‘My poor child, that is impossible!’ said St. Claire. ‘How could you help me?’

‘I could, if I tried,’ repeated Ione.

‘No, no, that is not to be thought of,’ he returned. ‘I have been rash, selfish, inconsiderate, Ione, and you must forget me and forgive me, if you can.’

‘I am to forget you?’ repeated Ione, going back to the uninterested and glacial manner she had had before.

‘Yes,’ he said, taking her hand. ‘I am not worthy of your thoughts.’

‘This means that you want to break off the engagement?’ she asked.

‘I must. I have not money enough to marry,’ he replied.

Neither looked at the other. Ione’s eyes were on the ground, his were strained to the far distance seen through an opening made by the trees, which framed the sea as if in a picture—to the far distance, beyond which lived Monica.

‘And it is only because you are poor that you want to break it off?’ Ione asked quite quietly.

How he wished that she would speak with passion—that she would look angry, revolted, proud, indignant, and not remain sealed and bound in this unnatural calmness!

‘Yes, only,’ he said in reply.

She turned to him suddenly and looked at him as if reading his soul while giving her own.

‘Tell me the very truth, Armine,’ she said. ‘Nothing stands between us but want of money? If there were money you would not wish to break off the engagement? It is only because of poverty? There is nothing else? Is this the whole truth?’ she repeated.

She forced him to look at her by the very domination of her love. Her eyes were as pathetic as are the Cenci’s. Her parted lips were parched and strained; her quivering nostrils seemed to breathe out the agony of the Medusa; the long white hand had closed on his with a convulsive grasp; her body was bent slightly forward; and she looked like one whose life is hanging on the verdict to be given.

His heart failed him. He could not tell her the true truth. It would be too cruel. He could not confess to her that he did



not love her while she looked like this—that she had simply wakened his pity and stirred his emotion for a moment, while his heart, his love, his devotion were all another's for perpetuity. He could not return her truth of passion by the confession of mere weakness to his own impulse. It would be too shameful! He must lie to her, and trust that God would forgive the sin for the sake of the motive.

‘It is only my poverty,’ he said in a low voice.

‘You love me, Armine, do you not?’ she continued, the strain increasing.

‘Who would not, Ione?’ he answered, soft, yielding, pitiful, as he was so sure to be.

‘Me and me only?’ she asked, forcing him still to look at her.

Her face was still that of Medusa in her agony—superhuman in anguish, superhuman in beauty—pleading for mercy under the guise of patience in suffering. He could not bear it. It was like putting a knife to her throat; and he could not!

‘Yes, you and you only,’ he said; but he turned away his eyes as he spoke.

‘Swear it!’ she said in a deep voice, her hand still clasping his as if in a vice.

‘My word is enough,’ was his reply.

‘Then I care for nothing else!’ she said, sinking back in her chair with the long-drawn sigh of one relieved from intolerable pain. ‘If you love me, Armine, all will be well with us. I will work for you; I will help you. I will be your good angel!’ she added passionately; ‘and I will make your life so happy that you shall not know a day or hour of pain. If you love me, I fear nothing in heaven or earth. The desert with you better than paradise without you! If you deceive me—if you do not love me,’ she added in a concentrated kind of voice, suddenly breaking through her exaltation and falling back on her old jealousies and suspicion—her face livid, her eyes alight with flame—‘if ever you leave off loving me, if ever you deceive me, I will kill myself, Armine! I have thrown all my happiness on you. If you fail me I shall die!’

‘I am not worthy of so much devotion,’ said Armine in torture. ‘I am a miserable wretch, contemptible to myself.’

‘Do not! do not! I will not hear that!’ cried Ione, laying her hand imperatively on his mouth. ‘You shall not say such things of yourself. You insult my love when you do. You are so good, so true, so noble—you are worthy of any woman’s love, even of a queen’s! But no one will ever love you as I do,’ she added. ‘No one could!’

‘But, Ione, my beautiful Ione, be reasonable!—we must be reasonable! Love will not keep us,’ urged poor St. Claire. ‘We

must come down to material considerations, and think of ways and means.'

'Love will keep us,' she said. 'It shall! You do not know what a good wife I shall make,' she added firmly. 'I have never had fair play here. When I am happy and with you I shall be so different! Oh, we are not to be separated for the want of a little money, and because you are afraid I shall suffer!' she added passionately. 'That would be sacrificing the true for the false, the real for the seeming.'

'You do not know what you are undertaking,' said Armine. 'You do not understand poverty. After your life here, where you have had everything you can possibly wish for, it will be terrible to you to feel that you have to curtail every desire—maddening to me to see you want and I not able to supply. It will break my heart,' he added with genuine tenderness, imagination and pity making together a very good simulacrum of love.

'It would not break mine if I wanted all the world so long as I had you,' said Ione. 'Only love me, Armine—love me as you love me now, and poverty will be more delightful to me than riches. The day when you no longer love me I shall kill myself—or you,' she said, with a sudden resumption of her former manner, her face livid, her eyes mere glittering lines between her narrowed lids, her hands clasped in each other with so much force that the knuckles were white and the flesh indented, her voice lowered to a kind of hiss—the snake, the panther, the wild beast, the demon that was in her roused and erect at the mere thought of her lover's infidelity.

At this moment Vincenzo passed before the two, and his shadow fell on them as they sat there beneath the carruba-tree. His broad face was set into its usual smile like an antique mask, but his eyes were burning coals as he doffed his cap and looked at the lovers askance, and so passed on with his noiseless step—the first omen of their betrothal.

'But that day will never come, will it, Armine?' Ione added caressingly, coming back to her loveliest and most seductive self. 'You love me as I love you, and you will be as little false to me as I to you? Is it not so? You could not be false, Armine?'

'No, I could not!' said Armine, taking her in his arms and kissing her—overborne by her stronger personality, by her greater intensity of love—overborne, and not able to free himself, though the end of the world should come upon him.

And she, poor passionate Ione, did not see that nothing save her own passion existed between them, and that all the rest was glamour created only by herself. She did not feel that his kiss was only responsive; that his love was only pity; that his acquiescence in things as they stood was because of his inability to give pain,

and not by the living will of passion. She gave what she had, and saw what she brought; and she desired no more than that which she believed she possessed. It was phantasmagoric, if one will; but what else is all life?—what else all love?

The engagement then was resumed and re-announced, and that wolf on the horizon was accepted as part of the condition of things, together with the bouquet and the ring. The family was the soul of complaisance, and deeply imbued with the sacred principles of liberty and the right of each individual to regulate his or her own life. Ione was of age; St. Claire knew his own mind. Who then had a right to interfere or object? Their congratulations had perhaps a certain false note of contempt in them; but Ione's happiness made her so comfortable to live with, they could not but rejoice in their own share of the good afloat. Moreover, they were glad to get rid of her. Taking her at all as one of themselves, and an adopted daughter second only to Clarissa, had been one of those mistakes which are sometimes made by arbitrary men when married to weak but persistent women. Captain Stewart had overborne his wife's opposition, but he had never been able to conquer her repugnance. Her own nature made her just, but Ione's had not won her love; so that the plan had not worked well for the happiness of the home, and the Captain had more than once secretly repented of his own masterful determination. Nevertheless, he always maintained when twitted with this failure that he had done what was right, and that he would do just the same had it to come over again.

Now, when the girl was to pass into other keeping, he was free to rejoice at the cessation of his own guardianship, and free to confess that a weight was taken off his hands which gave him the sense of relief.

So these latter days passed on velvet for all save St. Claire, and for him they were beset with thorns and spikes and burning ploughshares almost unendurable. But as he never found the courage to say to Ione: 'I do not love you, and I do love some one else,' he had to abide by his miserable portion, where the only solace was his belief that he was securing her happiness at the cost of his own.

## CHAPTER XXI.

### FOR ALL TIME.

THERE was no question of an immediate marriage following on this rash engagement between Armine and Ione. On the contrary, it was agreed that he should return to Oakhurst for the summer—and the winter too, if his peccant chest would stand the strain—and in the spring of next year he was to come back to Palermo for his

bride ; if by that time he had a fitting home for a wife. This gave him a little breathing-time and loosened the yoke by just so much. It also, he thought, would enable him to make arrangements for leaving Oakhurst altogether. He would exchange his practice for one which did not include Monica Barrington as a possible patient ; which did not necessitate his carrying a wife to the Dower House, as a proof of how loyally he had sealed his allegiance in his heart and how faithful he had been to his love and his ideal.

It was like staving off the evil day of payment to a man who has sold his soul to the devil, or given a bill to a creditor. If not redemption, it was at least delay ; and a straw to the drowning man gives a moment's hope of salvation.

What was the chance of salvation to Armine, to Ione was the possibility of destruction. She would rather have been married now without delay, suitable home or not ; and the restrictions imposed by prudence galled her as those other bonds galled her beloved. With the superstitious fears born of love, she was afraid of all probable and improbable dangers. This temporary separation was as grievous to her as an eternal farewell, and she saw in it the shapes of all the disasters which could possibly befall both her and the man she loved so blindly and so well. She might have fever and die, or he might be wrecked off the island of Capri on his return to the mainland ; she might lose her beauty by small-pox, or he might be taken by brigands in the giro, which, as an intelligent tourist, he was bound to make before leaving the island ; he might offend a mafiose and be shot—a camorrista, and be stabbed ; he might drink in typhus at Naples, or breathe in a perniciousa at Rome ; the train by which he travelled might run off the line ; the boat by which he crossed the Channel might be lost in a fog ; it was quite in the circle of possibilities that some dreadful mishap should touch him, and then what would be her life ? She longed to go with him that she might at least share his fate ; for, strong as the love of life was in her, the love of him who, she believed, loved her, was stronger, and she would rather have died with him than have lived without him.

If she had but known the truth !—that truth which was confusion of desire and chaos of thought, as now pity for Ione and now love for Monica, and now again anger and contempt for himself dominated him—that truth which was to-day consciousness of the splendid personality of the one, to-morrow yearning memories of the spiritualized beauty of the other, with remorse for the infidelity into which he had been seduced and for the deception to which he stood committed—that truth which, beneath the appearance of glad submission to the sweet bondage of his own love, was dumb revolt against the tyranny of hers ;—had she but known all this, what a fatal end to the cloud-built palaces wherein her soul dwelt royally to the enchanted visions which her love transformed

to solid facts! But, blinded as she was by the effulgence of her own passion, she saw nothing of what was, and dreamed away her life in the serene assurance that her enchantments were realities. Whether those dreams of hers came through the gate of ivory or that of horn was a thing she never asked herself. They were beautiful; they were intoxicating; they made her life like some stately poem, her love like some noble chant; and she peeped behind no blanket of the dark, simply for lack of suspicion that anything was to be seen were she to look.

So the time passed, golden-winged and rosy-fingered to her, leaden-footed and griffin-clawed to him; and the day came when he must leave his weeping love, sad as ever was Ariadne, and go on the giro like the rest.

Change of scene and recovery of personal liberty brought to St. Claire that feeling of relief which is the true gauge of pressure. He was no longer the slave of his own pity and the captive of a woman's love. He was free once more, and might think and act as seemed to him best. The farther he was removed from Ione's direct influence, the more surely he came back to himself, and the more impossible seemed the marriage. Putting his own feelings out of court, and forgetting Monica, he said to himself—standing on the ground of common sense—what had he to marry on? He who could scarcely keep himself, to think of adding a wife and probable children—it was folly to imagine such a thing; it would be a crime to translate that imagination into action. He pictured to himself his life such as it would be with Ione and poverty; the sordid struggles, the miserable needs, the want of order in the home, the want of harmony in their natures; and, on his side, the want of abiding love. He saw himself at Oakhurst married by the law to one woman, dedicated in heart and soul to another; with Monica's sweet grave eyes looking at him, half in sorrow, half in wonder, at his speedy consolation. This vision haunted him night and day, and seemed to stamp itself as with a red-hot iron into his brain. No, he could not face it!—he could not! He must write to Palermo and end that which ought never to have been begun. It would be a pain to poor Ione now; but marriage would be a greater pain to her hereafter; and of the two it was better to inflict the lesser and more transient than to let her undergo the larger and more enduring. She would learn to reconcile herself in time—to forget him, and perhaps to despise and hate him. The thought was grievous enough to one so sensitive and affectionate as he; but anything was better than things as they were at present!

He was full of all this while he went the prescribed round—startling the panting little lizards among the ruins of Girgenti; tracing out the lines where was fought at Syracuse that great battle which redeemed Sicily and ruined Athens; remembering Arethusa in her fountain and Galatea at Aci Reale; reconstructing



the past and repeopling the void as he stood, bathed in the silver of the moonlight or glorified by the sunrise, in the ruined theatre at Taormina; catching the burning blood-red beauty of the pomegranates and the waxen sweetness of the oleander, as he steamed through that exquisite tract which lies between Taormina and Messina;—but, wherever he went, feeling the difficulties of his position, and fuller of his own troubles than of the things about him.

This feeling of difficulty grew, as of course it would, and his courage strengthened with time and distance; so that when he was at Messina he wrote to Captain Stewart, repeating what he had said before—that he was too poor to marry as things were, and that he saw no prospect in the future of making such an income as would enable him to take a dowerless wife. His health was delicate; his friends were few; his outlook was dark; his horizon was narrow, and ever peopled with those fearful shapes of poverty and want and the gaunt wolf so sure to prowl about the door. In all these circumstances, then, he was bound as a man of honour to give up the engagement and restore Ione to freedom and her friends.

And then, because he was pitiful and kind-hearted, and more easily stirred by emotional impulse than became a man, he wrote to Ione more strongly than he really felt, thinking to soften the blow to her by expressing himself as broken-hearted in losing her.

And indeed at the moment he was deeply moved, thinking of the girl's sorrow, her beauty, and her love, till his eyes grew moist, and a tear fell from his long lashes on to the paper and blotted what he had written.

His decision was accepted by Captain Stewart in a curt letter of few words and no regrets. Ione did not write at all. But, as she was naturally represented by her adopted father, her silence was of the kind which affirms and consents; and St. Claire was once more free. He felt stronger and stouter, more manly altogether, than he had felt ever since that fatal day when the sunshine had bewildered him and his own weakness had overpowered him—when the story of Pygmalion had been renewed to his shame and Ione's misery. As he went on board the boat at Messina, setting his face towards Naples and leaving Sicily in the shadow of the past, his whole being was full of that divine sense of freedom which seemed to make up for all the rest. He was free—free to think of Monica and to forget Ione—free to love and live as he would, without any person's claim or right intervening—free to feel that he had acted as an honourable man should—that he had reasserted his manhood and his strength; and saved Ione from poverty and distress.

And yet her unfathomable eyes every now and then seemed to flash like light before him, and he felt a certain pain at his heart,

a certain oppression of soul and sense when he thought of her there in her loneliness and sorrow, and knew by his own experience what she suffered.

His mind was tossed and racked between self-condemnation and self-excuse. It had been all his fault, all his sin, that she was so unhappy now. He had been weak and wicked. Yet, what had he done that was so heinous?—given her a kiss. Was that such a crime that he should be required to expiate it with the happiness of his life, with perjury and deceit? It was morbid to condemn himself so severely—worse than morbid to give it such enduring effects. She and her people had taken him too seriously. The mischief had lain here, and not in his innocent kiss, which ought to have committed him to as little as it meant. He reasoned himself into a tolerably calm frame of mind for one hour; but the next his troublesome conscience made itself heard in spite of his efforts to silence it, and he suffered the tortures inevitable to folly when a man's heart is good, and his will has no backbone worth speaking of.

He was thinking all this one morning while sitting in the Villa at Naples, drinking in the sunlight but scarcely delighting in its charm. He had halted for a day or two on the way; for, though he was so much stronger and better altogether for his sojourn at Palermo, he was not able to bear great fatigue. And he had to husband his strength for his long journey home.

While sitting there with his air of disguised prince, he saw a tall slight figure coming slowly through the trees. Her cream-coloured dress, with its old-gold trimmings hanging in straight folds to her feet and clinging to her figure—her hat with its cream-coloured feathers tipped with old-gold—her gait and height, all suggested Ione. But surely it was only a fond suggestion of his fancy. It was impossible to be Ione; impossible! It might as easily be Monica herself—and yet how like!—literally and in very truth, how awfully like Ione!

The figure came slowly forward, looking to the right and the left as if searching for some one. As it neared him St. Claire saw the face—the yellow-hazel eyes which burned like living fire from under the level brows—the red-gold hair that caught the sunlight in its crossing threads till it glistened like a metallic aureole about her head—the lips apart as of one in mortal agony—the nostrils dilated and quivering with pain—the face that of the Medusa, beautiful, young, a goddess under torture, a woman in her moment of despair—yes, it was she; it was Ione! He was here and she was there, and only a few feet of earth divided them. The sea had been bridged over; time and distance were no more than thoughts; she had come to seek him in his flight—and she had found him.

As she saw him she gave a little cry and came up to him,

holding out her hands palm upwards, with the same gesture of self-giving as she had made under the carruba-tree.

‘I have come to you because I cannot live without you,’ she said in answer to his half-terrified exclamation. ‘It was worse than death to be there without you, Armine, and I would rather die than live if I am to live away from you.’

‘My poor girl! poor Ione! you have ruined both yourself and me,’ said Armine, with the very quietness of despair.

Of what use to struggle when the end has come?

‘Do not scold me, Armine,’ she said with strange humbleness. ‘If you love me as you say, you know by your own heart that I could do nothing else. How could I live without you or you without me? You knew that I would come. You knew that I would either drown myself in the sea or come to you. There was no help for it. And I knew that you wanted me!’ she added, turning to him with all a woman’s grace of self-bestowal when she confesses her own passion as a response to her lover’s.

What can a man do with the unwelcome devotion of a woman? Reject it?—fling it back in her face like the dust of dead men’s bones and the refuse of used things? But if he himself has been the cause? If he has made her believe that he loved her and wanted her love in return? And if she be young and beautiful, and of a kind whom even a prince, disguised or not, might be proud to win and wear?—how as a man of honour can he?—how as a man of flesh and blood is it possible? Even one who is all soul, and out of whom the beast has been eliminated, even he must pause before such a manifestation, staggered, and in some sense intoxicated.

It was to no good that Armine had tried to convince himself that he had not been to blame, and that really an innocent little kiss on the back of a girl’s neck ought not to have entailed all these grave consequences. It was of no use! He had been foolish, putting it at the best and mildest; and having been foolish he must pay for his folly. He had made the girl believe that he loved her, and she had taken him at his own showing. He had told her that his heart was broken, his life desolate, his future dark without her, and she had come to give him joy by the wealth of her love, sunshine by the warmth of her passion. Was this a time to think of maidenly modesty? of virginal reserve?—a time to wonder if she had not transgressed the strict bounds of both? Maidenly modesty and virginal reserve are jewels in the crown of womanhood; granted. But if love thinks that love craves? If the only barrier between happiness and the beloved is conventional prudence, are there not times and seasons when, to the loving, Society is only the ghost of a dead pedant, and Nature and Love are the living lords?

A woman is of flesh and blood all the same as a man, and

Ione's flesh and blood were more vitalized than were most. It was all because of her belief that Armine loved her and had given her up for her good against his own desire. Had she suspected the arid truth she would indeed have flung herself into the sea rather than have crossed it. For it is one thing for a woman to offer of her own free will the love which she believes is desired though not sought, and another to ask for a response to her own passion which has sprung up spontaneously, neither sought nor desired. The one comes into the list of heroic deeds, the other into that of follies which are also crimes against oneself. And Ione's was of the former.

Armine's emotion overcame him. It was not all the emotion of joy, but it was not all that of repugnance. He was a man, though a weak one, and he could not but feel the full force of the tremendous thing she had done for him. It would be his ruin and hers; nevertheless it was heroic, royal, sublime. And she was so beautiful, and her passionate devotion was so sincere!

'Do you really give me up for poverty only?' she asked after a pause, her soul stirring like a drugged sleeper half awakening. 'You do love me as I love you, do you not?'

Pitiful and kindly, weak and warmed by her love to something of its own fire, he could not undeceive her. She had come to him for love and joy, believing in him, trusting in him, loving him; and he could not give her sorrow and truth instead of that which she came to find—and to give.

'Yes,' he said steadily; 'I do love you, Ione. It is only because of poverty that I gave you up.'

'Then I care for nothing now in the world!' said Ione, with the air and manner of one who has gained the victory. 'If you love me—basta! I will work for you; I will be your good genius, Armine; and you shall find all things better because of me. Only love me as I love you and all will go well. Love me, and for ever after you shall have reason to bless the day when I took my life in my own hands and came to lay it in yours.'

She poured out her love as a flood wherein he was overwhelmed—she wrapped him in it as a garment of fire that clung closer than his own flesh; he could not resist her—no man could!—and he was swept away by the torrent and burnt by the fire. There was no other course open to him, and he had only to accept his position and legalize hers. He must make her his wife, ruin or not, and save her from the consequences of the folly she had committed for love of him. It was easy to say that he was weak and that he ought not to have yielded, but there are times in one's life when self-sacrifice is the bravest action and perjury to the past the first virtue; and this was one of them.

Wherefore he wrote to Captain Stewart and told him all that had been and all that was to be; and how, as soon as things could

be legally arranged, he would marry Ione at the Consulate. He ended by expressing a hope that he, the Captain, Ione's adopted father, and Mrs. Stewart, her adopted mother, would come over to Naples to give their sanction to the ceremony.

'But they will not,' said Ione, when he read the letter to her. 'I know them, Armine; you do not. They will not,' she repeated, when he combated her dictum by the baseless 'hope' of that superficial optimism which simply refuses to see the bad side of things because they are disagreeable to look at.

She proved herself right. To Armine's letter came, as a reply, certain legal documents by which Captain Stewart gave his consent to the marriage; three boxes, full of everything that could be said to belong to Ione—all her clothes, her trinkets, her girlish treasure, her books, her music, her very wrecks and relics of childish toys—all her property, down to the veriest bits of rubbish;—but for reply to the request of her adopted parents' presence to sanction the marriage, simply two lines: 'We desire to hear no more of you or of her. She is dead to us for ever.'

Thus the two began life together alone and absolutely isolated from all family connections whatsoever—she loving him with the whole force of her passion, the whole creative power of her imagination—he loving Monica, but resolved to bury her sweet image deep in the unfathomable recesses of his heart, and to do his duty to the girl who, for love of him, had not done it to herself.

## CHAPTER XXII.

### ACROSS THE AISLE.

It was a cold, dim, drizzly day when Armine and his bride came to Oakhurst—one of those three bad days in May when we are forced to shiver in dolorous penance for the premature warmth of April. True, the fields were green and the young leaves of the trees were laced with gold or flushed with crimson, but the heavy sky was leaden, overclouded, weeping, and no colour had its value for want of sunlight to give it life. True, too, the banks and hedgerows were starred with wild flowers and festooned with fragrant climbing-plants, and the trees and bushes were full of bloom; but the dead air brought forth no perfume from hawthorn or from lilac, from primrose-bank or cowslip meadow, and the flowers themselves gave one the impression of being asleep and silent. No birds sang from the trees with that delirious passion, that joyful ecstasy proper to the springtime and eloquent of the future summer; only a few nest-calls here and there broke the silence of the woods—only the faint murmur of the bees among the lime-blossoms overhead, like confused voices heard from afar, spoke of the continued



activities of life and nature. All was cold, colourless, depressed, dreary. It was an English spring at its worst moment—the moment which justifies the dwellers in those southern climes where the sun ever shines in their cynical belief that in England the sun never shines at all. It was as if a key-note had been struck by nature prefacing the theme on which man was hereafter to enlarge. And indeed the things human of this day were, for Armine and Ione, only too closely in accord with those of nature.

The young couple entered on their home-life absolutely unwelcomed. No greeting friend met them at the station; no beaming face looked out from door nor window to watch them pass and smile a kindly welcome; no warm, frank hand pressed theirs as they drove up to the dingy little house where Armine's slender income was made; only the one woman servant of the establishment—over-dressed, acrimonious, offended by the delay of the train, and already hostile to the new arrangements—and the rough-headed stable-man, seemed to have known of their existence, or to have looked for their arrival. The very locum tenens himself, good Mr. Benjamin Hoskins, was unavoidably absent from the house; and thus it was that the two young people came to their home without recognition or congratulation from any one.

Never was a colder, duller, less genial reception of a beautiful bride; and Armine's kind heart was pained as he noticed the universal neglect of the neighbourhood, and thought of the pinched poverty and social isolation to which her love for him had doomed Ione.

How sorry he was for her!—how sorry too, for himself!—and how much he regretted that which no regrets could now undo! This terrible Frankenstein of disaster which had sprung from that one impulsive and innocent little kiss!

Ione did not seem to feel the want which was only too palpable to St. Claire. As they crossed the threshold of her uninviting home, she laid her hand on his with a loving gesture—a gesture, however, which had none of that shy submission, that caressing timidity so essentially feminine—but a gesture which expressed a love too energetic to be submissive, too assured to be shy, too intense to be circumspect. Turning to him, she looked into his face with eyes which seemed to claim him as her own—eyes which had never looked at him as yet with aught but the adoration of love. She did not see the ugliness of her surroundings—she saw only the beauty of her husband; and the universal neglect which had chilled him was to her non-existent, warmed as she was with the fire of her own heart.

But for all that hidden warmth she could not resist the physical influences of time and place; and as she went into the cold and gloomy sitting-room she shivered and drew her light mantle closer round her.

'Are you cold, dear?' asked Armine tenderly.

'Yes, horribly,' she answered frankly. 'How cold it is! Does it always rain like this, Armine?'

'No; not always,' he said with a smile. Then turning to the woman, he added: 'Light a fire, Mary, will you?'

'If you wish it, sir,' said Mary, her voice both sharp and reluctant.

'Certainly I wish it,' he answered.

'But the bright bars are in, doctor,' she returned, with a certain acrid familiarity not reassuring.

'And what of that?' said Armine, to whom bright bars were unknown mysteries.

'Perhaps your good lady knows?' said Mary, looking at Ione curiously.

She was more than doubtful if the good lady, with her foreign eyes and touzled hair, knew anything so civilised. Word had gone through the place that the young doctor had married a heathen papist—a blackamoor—may be a Hottentot; and Ione's passable if not quite perfect English and red-gold hair, which Mary mentally called a carroty mop, had surprised and in a certain sense disconcerted the woman. Perhaps, after all, she might even know the sacred meaning of bright bars and recognise the iniquity of fires in May? At all events, Mary made the cast, and waited for the result.

Ione looked at her with the haughtiness, the insolence, which the opposition of her social inferiors always roused in her. These late days of happiness in the fancied security of her love had not made her democratically amiable to all the world, though they had made her so soft and sweet to Armine; and she had already taken one of those instinctive dislikes to this woman to which all nervous organizations are liable—dislikes which are to the moral nature what fear and horror are to the physical.

'I know nothing about your absurd bright bars,' she answered. 'Light a fire at once; do you hear?'

'We do not do such things here, Mrs. St. Claire; but of course if you wish it—you are mistress here now, and the bright bars are none of my business, for I won't clean them again,' said Mary insolently.

She was indignant at being spoken to with authority by a lady; as is the way with women who have been used only to the slack commandship of a master; and she had moreover that odd contempt for Ione's evident unaccustomedness to English habits of life which uneducated people feel for all difference of ways and ignorance of local custom.

'Do as you are told, and hold your tongue,' said Ione harshly. Then, as Mary after a moment's hesitation left the room muttering angrily to herself, she said to Armine, with some surprise: 'What

a horrid, rude, cross old wretch that is! How different from that good old Amarella or that dear kind Vincenzo!’ she added, her thoughts turning back with their first shadow of regret to the soft complaisance which was the rule in her old home. There both men and women would have promised ‘mountains and seas,’ if that would have contented her, and made her forget her inconvenient desire till the time for fulfilment had passed. But if she had persisted, they would have said ‘a suo comodo’ with resignation, mentally repeating an Ave to make heavenly capital out of their earthly trouble, or fortifying themselves with those two camels of endurance—‘coraggio’ and ‘pazienza.’ And here this hard, ugly, over-dressed woman made a scene about lighting a fire when it was as cold as winter—a thing which those dear slipshod, untidy, and good-natured creatures would have done of their own accord.

It was another jarring note in what should have been the day’s glad symphony; but Ione was too happy to allow herself to be seriously impressed by even this uncomfortable little scene—this small act of strife as the first event of her home-life.

‘At all events I have you,’ she said, turning to Armine with her imperious love; ‘and you will never fail me, will you?’ she asked, her hand on his shoulder.

‘No,’ said Armine, speaking as if in a dream.

He was standing by the table, holding in his hand an envelope addressed to Mr. Benjamin Hoskins, and looking intently at the writing. It was Monica’s.

‘What are you thinking of, Armine?’ asked Ione, her hand tightening on his shoulder.

Underneath the soft overlay of her love struck the sharper accent of suspicion, the rougher note of jealousy.

‘Nothing,’ answered Armine, just a shade of coldness in his face and manner.

‘Something has annoyed you,’ she persisted, her yellow-hazel eyes beginning to glitter. ‘What is that envelope?’

‘You see,’ he said; ‘an envelope.’

‘Whose writing is it, Armine?’

‘How should I know?’ he answered evasively. ‘It is not addressed to me.’

‘Then what is the matter with you?’

‘Nothing, Ione, nothing! You lose your time in watching me so closely. It is nothing,’ he repeated. Then he added, by a happy after-thought—more happy than true: ‘I am only sorry that Mary was so rude to you.’

‘Oh, if that is all, it is nothing,’ she answered, the glitter passing out of her eyes and the softness of love returning to them. ‘Cross, horrid old wretch, I do not care what she says! But she shall go if she is rude. I will not keep her if she is insolent; and even as it is she shall go.’

And as she said these words Mary came into the room, having halted outside the door to listen.

'Yes, Mrs. St. Claire,' she said viciously, flinging down the bundle of 'kindling' she was carrying; 'I am quite willing to go. We are not used to be treated like slaves here, like what you are in those heathen lands you come from. And what is more, I for one won't be neither. So, if you please, suit yourself this day month; and I hope you'll get some one who will take as much care of the things, and work early and late for poor food and low wage, as I have done.'

And with this, forgetting all about the fire and the bright bars, she left the room in a fury, and slammed the door after her so that the whole house shook.

Armine looked vexed; Ione at first amazed and then furious.

'What a bad, insolent old woman!' she said angrily. 'She deserves a good beating. I should like to fling her out of the house this instant! Send her away, Armine, at once. Send for the carabinieri and fling her out!'

'Hush, Ione! you must not say such things here,' said Armine. 'We are not used to this kind of thing in England.'

'Then you will have to get used to it,' said Ione, suddenly assuming that dangerous coldness of obstinate opposition characteristic of the bad and sad old days. 'I shall say what I think, in England or anywhere else.'

'For Heaven's sake hush, Ione!' reiterated Armine. 'Mary may hear you.'

'And what do I care if a common wretch like that hears me or no?' retorted Ione. 'She is a bad, insolent, ugly old creature, and she does deserve a beating and to be flung out of the house.'

'If this is the way in which you are going to treat English servants, you will find it will not answer,' said Armine, with undeniable irritation.

'And you defend a common wretch like that against me, Armine!' cried Ione, with a sudden blaze of passion. 'If I had not heard it with my own ears I would not have believed it. I can scarcely believe it now.'

'Nonsense, Ione, I do not defend her. How can you excite yourself by such exaggeration?' he said.

'Do you mean that I tell lies, Armine?' she asked, as she might have asked the same question of Clarissa when things went cross between them.

And on this Armine went out of the room, presently returning with Mary at his heels and a coal-scuttle in her hand, having coaxed her as a woman to do her duty as a servant.

Thus it chanced that the first discomfort between these two young people, since their marriage, was brought about by the sordid circumstance of a servant's ill-temper, founded on the

trifling fact that Ione had drawn her mantle a little closer round her shoulders. So true is it that the greatest events of life spring from the most insignificant causes, and that the deepest feelings may be routed, the most heroic actions nullified, by the meanest and most trivial accidents of life.

Mary had heard the whole of this conversation—or rather squabble—between the young people; and the first authentic account of the new bride, spread through Oakhurst, was that she was a heathen, a Tartar, and a slave-driver, who offered to beat her, Mary, with her own hands, because she remarked meekly that the bright bars were in the parlour-grate—and should she make the young lady a fire somewhere else?

‘A regular bad ‘un!’ said Mary to her audience; and her audience sucked in their lips and said: ‘Belike. How could it be else, seeing where she came from?’

Thus the story grew and grew, as all such stories do in country places, till before the week was out, the game of Russian Scandal was repeated in such grave earnest that even Ione’s worst enemies would not have recognised her in the caricature which prejudice and exaggeration had hammered out between them.

Story or not, no one was prepared to welcome these young people—no one was in the mind to receive Ione with kindness or to congratulate St. Claire with sincerity. All the fathers and mothers whose daughters had been secretly offered and tacitly rejected were angry with the young fellow who had not found his match at home but had had to go abroad for a wife. They took it as a moral offence, and were prepared to resent it as a personal affront. Miss Maria Crosby was perhaps the loudest in her denunciations of the wickedness which was assumed to lie in this marriage of her former fancy. She had thought better of him, she said with virtuous acrimony; but there! no one can say what any one will ever do; and when you take to any one, you are sure to be disappointed in them and to find them not worth a button. This was her experience in life; and Dr. St. Claire was one who confirmed her belief.

Mrs. Anthony Barrington was also disgusted by the marriage. How could they patronise this most undesirable person, the new wife? While Dr. St. Claire was single, and they were not committed to some odious woman, it was all very well to be kind to him and all that; but how could they possibly receive her? She was sure to be some vulgar, underbred creature who would drop her h’s and eat with her knife; and really it was a most awkward position for every one.

But when she said this to her husband, he answered a little shortly:

‘You should have thought of this contingency, Theo, before you brought the fellow so far out of his place as to ask him here to



dinner. And for the matter of that, I dare say she is quite as good as he is, and will probably be more amusing. We men found him a dull dog enough, I can assure you; and what you women ever saw in him is one of the things I cannot for the life of me understand.'

'Well, I never saw anything!' laughed Theo. 'Monica and mamma did, but I—never!'

On her side, Mrs. Barrington of the Dower House was doubtful both of the wisdom and propriety of the whole thing; seeing that Ione came from a foreign country, and might wish to Romanize the people here; for which unfortunate proselytism, as the wife of the medical man, she would have only too many opportunities. Besides this, the practice of such a place as Oakhurst was not lucrative enough to support the wife and family of a man of Dr. St. Claire's pretensions. So that altogether she was doubtful and almost distressed, and faintly hoped that things would come right in the end and turn out better than they looked now.

Monica's first feeling was one of acute disappointment; though she hated herself that it should be so, and though she assured herself twenty times a day that she was very glad Armine St. Claire was happy and had forgotten her. Nevertheless, she was curiously pained for a person who had cause for thankfulness; but she was pained for him rather than for herself—for his character as an ideal rather than for any change in her own relations with him. She thought his nature had been different, and that he would have considered it a crime to marry a girl brought up in Sicily. Of course he had the right to judge for himself and to do what was best for his happiness; but she could not think that happiness would be secured by marrying a girl brought up in Sicily. She had no fault to find with Ione, of whom she knew nothing, while refusing to believe that first crude scandal which spread like wildfire through the place. She knew of her no more than others knew—and this was only what the announcement in the papers told them; how that Armine St. Claire, M.D., of Oakhurst, had married at the Consulate of Naples, Ione, the adopted daughter of Captain Ralph Stewart, of Palermo, Sicily. And this was not much. Still, Sicily was such a long way off; and the marriage seemed to have been so strangely hurried and unexpected—so unlike anything that might have been looked for from him!

This was what she thought to herself—the extreme lengths to which her secret disapprobation went. Outwardly, and to others, she defended his action with her own sweet gentleness of judgment and quiet firmness of advocacy—that kind of gentleness of firmness which never arouses opposition to advocacy, because so entirely free from all aggressiveness on its own side.

Edward Formby was the only one in the whole society who

took an active part in upholding St. Claire. He went in for defence of the marriage with as much loyalty and enthusiasm as if he had had a personal hand in it, and it touched his honour somehow to prove it perfect. He spoke much of the irreproachable standing of Captain Stewart, which was in itself a strong backstay; and, man-like, he advocated the cause of the girl whose foreign appearance and undeniable beauty had already been as much talked of as her wickedness. He thought that St. Claire was to be envied, not reviled, in that he had fished up a prize in the way of looks out of foreign waters; and he defended the young fellow with genuine warmth when Anthony growled and Mrs. Anthony laughed, and dear Mrs. Barrington mildly doubted and gravely feared, while Monica alone came to his side with that charity which hopes all things and thinks no evil.

‘Men marry to please themselves, not their friends,’ Edward said, with unintentional point; ‘and if a man loves a pretty girl, why should he not make her his wife? What the deuce else can he do? St. Claire has done quite right; the only drawback is that cursed question of finance, and whether they can pull through or not. Outside this there is nothing to be said against the marriage. And for the money-bags, that is their own affair.’

He spoke with almost personal warmth, as if it had been his own business that he was discussing.

‘I think you are quite right, Edward,’ said Monica; but she did not look up when she spoke. She was occupied with the teaspoons. ‘It is, as you say, their own affair only; but if we choose we can make things better for them by our kindness to them; and I hope we will.’

Mrs. Anthony looked at her sister-in-law sharply; then suddenly, flushing all over her face, she broke into a thin laugh and said:

‘What a queer creature you are, Monica!’ speaking in that short staccato way she had when she was cross—a way like nothing so much as the dropping shot of small pistols.

To the discredit of Oakhurst, it must be said that those who went to church next Sunday went as full of the bride as of their devotions. This marriage was the great event of the moment, and by the exaggerated reports afloat concerning Ione it had been made of even more than natural importance. Even old Mr. Milwood, the bachelor rector—a good old soul who had no evil thoughts, though he had as keen an eye for female beauty as he had a discriminating taste for old port and brown sherry—even he peered over his spectacles when he rose from his knees after the initial prayer in the reading-desk, to scan his congregation as his manner was, but chiefly to find out the new-comer. And he said approvingly to himself: ‘Pretty dear! pretty dear!’ as Ione came in with her husband, looking like a young queen entering on her

kingdom—as superb in her consciousness of power, and as haughtily indifferent to the homage which nevertheless she claimed as her own, as was ever eastern empress with slaves for subjects.

The first Sunday ! To Armine it was simply martyrdom, with no crown to recompense him for the cross. He had resolved to bear his pain like a hero and to do his duty like a man. No one should see that he suffered—no one ; not even Monica, to whom it would have been unspeakable relief to have cried out and told the whole sad story of his past weakness and present anguish. But he must hide it all ; and let her believe, with the rest, that he had married of his own free will, in nowise compelled by circumstances ; and that he was happy and exultant as a bridegroom should be.

He came in with his bride ; showed her to her seat in the pew ; arranged her footstool : paid her the few attentions possible to the time and place with almost ostentatious punctiliousness. And just across the aisle, parallel with them, sat Monica and her mother in the Barrington pew—just there where they could not help seeing them and taking cognizance of every look and movement.

Monica was deadly pale, but quite quiet and composed. This first trial over, she thought, all the rest would be easy ; for she had schooled herself with severity, and fathfully believed that she had learned her lesson. And, for herself, she was glad that the shock of first seeing Armine in his altered conditions had come to her at church. He, too, was as white as the handkerchief with which he so often wiped his upper lip ; but outwardly he was as grave and composed as herself. He felt like a criminal, but he bore himself as if unconscious of evil. He was more miserable than he once could have imagined it possible to be, and yet live through the trial—more miserable now than in the past, because self-degraded ; but he had brought himself into this false position, and he must abide by the consequences of his own folly.

Wherefore, he ostentatiously paid Ione all those small attentions which were proper to the time and place, and forbore to look at Monica while he did so.

There was his Love—the woman whom nature seemed to have made for him—pure, gentle, sweet, refined, patient while she suffered, strong while she wept, able to renounce her own desire for higher things and to conquer even love for the sake of duty. And here was his wife, for whose very beauty he had only that kind of admiration which stirs the senses and leaves the heart untouched—with whose nature he had no spiritual sympathy, jealous, exacting, over-fond as it was—a woman whose love oppressed him by its tyrannies and fatigued him by its insistence—a woman who held him more than he held her, and who had taken him captive under the guise of surrendering to his will.

He glanced at Monica's tender face with its dreamy melancholy,

its saintly stillness and resignation, not so beautiful as Ione's, judging by the beauty of the flesh only, but how far more lovely by the spirit!—and then he caught Ione's yellow-hazel eyes turned on him with that rapt look of passionate love which seemed to envelope him in flames; and he shivered suddenly as if a cold wind had blown over him.

Edward Formby was immensely struck by the beauty of the young bride. She seemed to him the loveliest creature he had ever seen—a woman to turn men's heads and make crowds go mad for her mere smile. Her eyes were like new-born worlds to him—revelations of a new dispensation. They woke up something in him unfelt before. For such a woman he thought he could become an anchorite or a hero—live in torture or die in ecstasy. She was too good for St. Claire. Monica Barrington was of the type to have suited him better. Edward had always liked St. Claire, and had stood his friend in the place; but now he partly envied and partly despised him for the possession of a treasure of which he was certainly not worthy. Perhaps no man would have been fully worthy—but some would have come nearer the mark than Armine St. Claire.

Once, and once only, Monica looked across the aisle, first at Armine and then at Ione. Her eyes a little failed her, and her heart seemed to stop still; but she turned to the hymn which she had no voice to sing, and tried to lose herself by closely following the words with her mind and repeating them in her heart. She did not look again, and her subsequent prayers were more fervent than usual; and they were never cold.

None of the Barringtons left the church quite so soon as usual to-day, and Armine took out Ione rather sooner than had been his wont—mingling with the crowd of the second set, and not waiting for the Upper Ten as in times past. Thus the two former friends did not meet—neither in the porch nor on the walk, nor yet under the lych-gate as of old; and both St. Claire and Monica felt that it was best. Each had borne as much as was wise for the first strain, even though the time and place had helped them. Across the aisle! The church and the law between them—religion and morality the twin sentinels set against them; and only the invisible and indestructible tie of a spiritual love to bind them!

While the family strolled down the church-walk, Theodosia cried suddenly:

'What an odd-looking creature that Mrs. St. Claire is! Don't you think so, mamma?'

'She looks foreign,' said Mrs. Barrington cautiously.

Her failing vision had told her only this as a general impression, and had not supplied the details.

'She is splendid!' said Edward Formby, his cheeks flushed and his eyes glistening. 'She is magnificent!'

‘What do you think, Monica?’ asked Theodosia, with a curious little laugh.

‘I think with Edward, that she is wonderfully beautiful,’ answered Monica, looking somewhat gratefully into the face of the man for whom the fitness of things and the lay of the land had destined her.

‘Do you think you shall like her?’ asked Theo with another laugh.

‘Yes, I am sure I shall,’ returned Monica.

She had made up her mind. Of all in Oakhurst she would be the best friend of Armine St. Claire’s wife, and would stand by her with the most faithful support.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

### THE OAKHURST BRIDE.

IONE was standing in her shabby drawing-room looking at herself in the glass. She was thinking of Armine more than of her own beauty; or rather she was looking at her beauty as at something that was Armine by the conversion of love—something that he had made his own and stamped for ever with his impress. This was just the place where he had kissed her this morning before he had left her for his early rounds. She forgot to remember, as she had forgotten to remark at the time, that she herself, with hands clasped round his neck, had drawn his face down to hers, upturned to receive the caress claimed rather than returned. She only knew that just here he had kissed her; and, smiling that deep-hearted smile of happy love, she passed her hand caressingly over the spot as if she could still find the sweetness of his touch.

How happy she was! What a divine thing it was to love and be loved!—to make the beloved’s whole life, and to be the owner and dispenser of his happiness!—to live in the light and warmth of a sun to which the material orb is but a dull and distant star!—to be the owner of a treasure to which the wealth of the world is but as dross! True. But if the rôles are inverted and the antiphony is falsely intoned?—if the one gives who ought to yield and the other grants who ought to demand?—then confusion comes in the place of security, sorrow dispossesses joy, and the shame of disinheritance falls where should have been the crowned grace of loving womanhood.

Of all this Ione was as oblivious as she was of the fact that the little love-passage which she was recalling with so much exaltation of passion in her remembrance, had been claimed by her rather than proffered by him, and that in the living drama between them she gave and he received—she loved and he endured. Yet in the



midst of all this exaltation she was vaguely conscious of a certain formless want for which she could not have found a name had she tried—that kind of dim consciousness which feels but does not apprehend.

While she was still standing there before the glass, a ring at the door-bell startled her from her reverie, and she heard a lady's voice asking if she were at home. In another moment the servant opened the door of the sitting-room and ushered in Miss Barrington—pale, quiet, heart-sick, but not terrified by what was before her.

This visit to Armine St. Claire's wife was an ordeal which Monica would willingly have avoided had she been able. But it had to be gone through, cost what it might; and she thought that the sooner it was undertaken the sooner its terrors would be over. Taking her mother's card, she drove into Oakhurst to pay this dreaded visit alone; thinking it safer to meet Armine and his wife without witnesses who might read in her face the shadows of thoughts she could not wholly banish, than to go with Theodosia, say, and subject herself to dangerous diagnosis at the time and moral vivisection ever after. She had confidence in herself and her power of bearing pain without wincing. If those intrusive thoughts were not wholly banished they were held in strict subjection—if all human weakness was not destroyed it was reasoned down as rigorously as if she, who had loved and might never know, had been a nun whose clearest glimpse of the world had been on the day of her profession. She had made it clear to her intelligence that everything was better as it was; that Armine unmarried would have been sometimes a danger and always a pain; but married, and taken out of the category of possibilities, he was in a sense sacred—and pain would therefore be a sin. Yes, in the presence of his wife, she would lay her hand in his, hear his voice, look into his eyes, and banish from her for ever all regret, all disappointment, all remembrance of what had been, or, had fate been kinder, what might have been.

Yet, for all her calm, clear reasoning and brave decision, she was as pale as something dead or dying when she entered the room and stood there face to face with Armine's wife—the woman for whom he had dispossessed her in his heart and for whose love he had forgotten her own.

Pallor is not an accusing witness of much account, and even the unsleeping suspicion of Ione's jealousy found nothing disturbing in this new visitor's gentle face with its patient melancholy and dreamy abstraction, its beauty of expression rather than of feature or of colouring. She only thought her sweet and quite uninteresting—well-bred and by no means fascinating on the one side nor dangerous on the other. To her she was just the Monica Barrington she was to every one else; good and sweet and gentle,

but incapable of a heart-throb beyond that which is allowed by the strictest propriety—for fear say, or the vague wrongs of distant peoples—in no wise capable of a heart-throb for love of a man not socially her equal, and now the husband of another woman! And when Miss Barrington shook hands with the young bride kindly, welcomed her to Oakhurst frankly, and asked after her husband as if nothing lay behind her words and Armine St. Claire had never been the realisation of her ideal, Ione neither saw the shadow nor heard the echo of the past whereby, unknown to herself, her whole presence was influenced; but received and returned Monica Barrington's greetings with no more distrust of hidden love than she had of future sorrow.

'You have been here too short a time to be able to say that you like Oakhurst,' said Monica, after the first courtesies had been exchanged. 'But I hope that you are not disappointed with it so far, and that you think it pretty?'

She said this with a curious mixture of advocacy and apology; fogland being so far behind that beautiful sunland whence this rare creature had come; but the brave old home having its own claims nevertheless.

'It is beautiful!' said Ione enthusiastically.

'Yet after your lovely Sicily our climate must seem very bad, and our sun very dim,' said Monica.

'Have you ever been to Sicily?' asked Ione, a little sharply.

'No, never,' said Monica.

'What has my husband been saying about it?' she asked again. 'Did he write to you, or have you seen him since he came home?'

'Neither,' answered Monica, a look of surprise mingled with fear—what did Ione suspect?—for a moment troubling her mild eyes.

'I hate Sicily!' then said Ione, speaking with a certain mixture of passion and contempt—a certain accent of resentment that again startled Monica with the sense of secret pitfalls.

'I have always understood that it was so beautiful,' she returned, not knowing what else to say.

'People pretend that they think so, but it is not,' said Ione. 'I should like you to be there when the scirocco blows! I never saw any beauty in it, and always wanted to be in England.'

'And now you have your wish,' said Monica.

'Yes!' said Ione, a smile coming like light into her face as her thoughts left the turbulent grief of the past and came back to the dear delight of the present.

'And are not disappointed:—that is nice,' said Monica.

Ione touched the locket on her bosom. It contained one of Armine's raven curls.

No,' she said, with the same deep-hearted smile that had

been on her face once before to-day. 'I am too happy to be disappointed.'

'I am glad,' said Monica, in a low voice.

'My husband is so good! No one knows how good he is but me!' said Ione. Then she added proudly: 'I like to think I am the only one who knows.'

'He was liked here,' said Monica with some difficulty.

'Oh, you could not love him as he deserves! You did not know him as I do!' returned Ione. 'And he does not seem to have any real friends here,' she added with her well-known resentful accent.

'I should have thought he had a great many,' said Monica, playing nervously with the tassel of her parasol.

'When you let him get in such a frightful state of health!' was Ione's reproachful rejoinder.

'I hope he is better,' said Monica.

The talk was very painful to her, and yet it seemed impossible to change the current of conversation.

'Oh, he is quite another thing! People are always well when they are happy,' said Ione with a proud kind of laugh.

'He looks stronger,' said Monica.

'When did you see him?' asked Ione with one of her sudden full-front stares.

'At church,' replied Monica.

'Oh yes, of course!' said Ione. 'You looked at him then; and you think he looks stronger? I am glad! Yes, indeed he is! You should have seen the wreck he was when he came to Palermo; but we took such good care of him from the first that we soon got him well. He is quite a giant now, compared to what he was! My poor dear, beautiful Armine! He always used to remind me of a saint, or something like that, when he was so thin and pale; but he never lost his beauty even when he was at the worst.'

'He is very good-looking,' said Monica mechanically.

She wished that Ione would not discuss her husband in this intimate manner. And indeed for one so jealous it might seem strange that she should. But, coincident with this jealousy was her pride in her possession and a certain almost fierce desire to parade her power and prove to the world the arbitrariness of her holding.

'How dreadfully ill he was!' continued Ione. 'You had almost killed him among you.'

'He was sadly broken down before he left,' said Monica.

'But you cannot imagine how soon he recovered in Palermo,' Ione returned, still harping on that jarring string. 'He seemed to get well directly after we knew him. And we saw so much of him that we could judge.'

'You saw so much of him?' repeated Monica, almost like an echo.

'Yes, from the first,' said Ione. 'He took to us, and we to him, from the very first. It was all at first sight,' she added, again that strange proud smile coming like so much physical light into her face.

Monica's tender mouth trembled for just a moment; yet she smiled too, despite that sensitive quiver, and looked into Ione's face as if sympathizing with her retrospect of blissful love.

'Those things always are,' she said vaguely.

And Ione answered, 'Yes; always,' as if her words, like Monica's, were both explanatory and intelligible.

'I hope your father and mother will like your new home,' then said Monica, as unsuspecting of a stab as Ione had been of torture.

The young bride's face changed.

'I do not expect them,' she said haughtily.

'No? not yet? I hear from Edward Formby that Captain Stewart is said to be a very charming man,' said Monica, glad to make a diversion from Armine.

'Who is this Mr. Formby?' asked Ione, on her side glad to make a diversion from her adopted parents.

'Who is he?—Edward Formby of Hillside, a good, dear fellow—a great friend of my brother's and a good friend to every one. He is nothing else that I can say; just Edward Formby of Hillside,' was Monica's not too lucid reply.

'He seems rather nice, and such a thorough Englishman!' said Ione with a little laugh. 'It is not the kind we caricature in Italy; but he is such an Englishman of one kind!'

'Do you know him?' asked Monica, in her turn surprised.

This was only Tuesday. If Edward Formby had already called—the very day after that first public appearance at church—it was showing a zeal for the young couple almost beyond his promise—almost beyond what was necessary.

'Yes, he called here yesterday,' said Ione. 'And he likes my husband so much that of course I like him. But I did not know more about him than his name and where he lives. And you have told me no more. Armine has not talked to me of the people here. He says they are not interesting.'

'I am afraid we are not very,' said Monica, with a sad kind of patience.

She remembered when Theodosia had said the same thing. She had not believed her then. Somehow she did believe Ione. But what would have wounded her then, if true, seemed now the right thing to have been said.

'I made him tell me of one or two I noticed at church,' continued Ione. 'You were one,' shortly; 'and that dark, sharp-faced, little woman, your sister-in-law I think—she was one. She is so like a pretty rat! But I had not noticed this Mr. Formby.'

'It is difficult to understand all about a new place at first,' said Monica, finding it difficult for her own part to realise that Armine had discussed her with his wife. 'You will soon however grow into it, for the society here is not large. What a nice piece of ground you have for a garden!' she broke off suddenly, looking at the neglected tract which grew more weeds than flowers and more daisies and dandelions than the turf proper for an English lawn. 'Do you like gardening, Mrs. St. Claire?' she added, to take the conversation away from people, bristling as it was there with difficulties, and throw it on innocuous things.

'I like flowers, but what should I know of gardening?' said Ione, in a somewhat offended tone.

Did this pale-faced girl think she had been used to dig and weed and water like papa's barefooted workman?

'I am very fond of gardening,' said Monica simply. 'I like to see my own seeds come up, and the things that I have planted grow and blossom. I feel as if they were part of myself, when I have planted and taken care of them. Do not you?'

'I have never tried,' said Ione coldly.

'No? what a pity! You have really lost a pleasure!' said Monica with a sweet smile, seeing the feeling behind the manner. 'I have always had my own garden, ever since I was a child,' she went on to say, thinking to calm this sensitive pride by the comparison. 'At the Manor, and now at the Dower House, I have my own domain where I may do as I like—grow my favourite flowers, and pick them as I choose, without the interference of that dreadful tyrant, Mawe,' she added with another smile.

'Who is Mawe?' asked Ione, a little unpleasantly.

'Our head gardener,' returned Monica; 'who calls everything his and treats us as interlopers who have no business to interfere when we ask for flowers, or remonstrate with him about the fruit and vegetables.'

'He is quite right,' said Ione, still unpleasantly. 'In Sicily we leave all things of this kind to men; and though we pick what we like, without leave of course, we do not do the work of servants ourselves.'

'We do not call such light work as we can do, servants' work,' said Monica very gently. 'You see, English girls are so much more active in their habits than Continental ones. We live so much more out of doors, and use our strength more freely.'

'Still, I should not like to do a man's work or to make myself a servant,' said Ione, sticking to her text, and forgetting all that she had promised both herself and Armine before marriage. 'And there are so few flowers here,' she continued. 'There is no *bougainvillea*, no *datura*, no *acacia*, nothing that we have in Sicily; and the roses are so poor, and the geranium bushes such poor little scrappy things! I do not look at that place out there



as a garden at all. It is like the fields round the Favorita; and not half so pretty as these when the pheasant's-eyes are out.'

'There will be more flowers as summer comes on,' said Monica. 'It is rather too early yet for full bloom. But when your man has weeded your garden, it will look much better; and if he will come up to the Dower House I will tell Mawe to let him have some cuttings and bedding-out plants which will furnish it and make it gay.'

'I am quite content with it now,' said Ione proudly. 'It is Armine's, and I prefer it as it is.'

'As you will,' said Monica, a spasm almost like faintness gripping at her heart.

After this the talk wandered over a few more subjects, to be always dragged round by Ione to Armine—ever Armine—the central point of her thoughts, the master-key of her interests. She was not in general a confidential or expansive person; but a very demon of girlish garrulity seemed to have possessed her to-day; and, after she had borne as much as she well could, Monica got up and drove away, leaning back in her carriage pale, weary, and with the feeling of having been bruised and beaten all over.

She had given her all to this man—her secret soul, her hidden love, her unspoken faith, her unavowed constancy, her whole power of idealisation and belief in his matchless worth. And from the first moment of his seeing another he had forgotten her and loved that other! It was a heart-break; not for herself, to whom he had been ever impossible, but for him—in that he had proved himself so unworthy of her former secret reverence. Nevertheless she would stand his friend as heretofore; and she would be his young wife's defender. And as things were in Oakhurst she knew that she had her work cut out for her, and that her self-imposed task would not be light.

She was right. The pronounced difference in manner and appearance, in tone of thought and rule of living, between Ione and the Oakhurst world, was set down in the score against the young wife as a sin which called for reprobation; and she had to suffer in general esteem because her hair was shorter and curlier than that of her neighbours; because her manner was stiller on the one hand if, on the other, she used certain little gestures to which English people are unaccustomed—as when she turned up her chin and struck her tongue against her teeth for a negative—shook her forefinger slowly before her face to enforce disapprobation or express earnestness—shrugged her shoulders for disdain, or said *Altro* for emphasis of assent; because her eyes were yellow-hazel in some light, green in others, and inexplicable always; because her nostrils were large, thin, transparent, and never still; because her face was not modelled after the ordinary English type, and her beauty, which was undeniable, was therefore odd and

displeasing; because her speech was coloured with the faintest little accent of an indefinite kind—a certain caressing lingering on the letters, which Edward Formby thought the most charming thing in the world and every one else the most affected. All these differences were commented on and condemned whenever two or three were gathered together to discuss the new bride and formulate their causes of disapproval.

And they were always meeting and discussing and formulating. Nothing was talked of in the place but young Mrs. St. Claire and her queer household management; the hours at which she got up and those at which she went to bed; her dresses and her dinners; her ignorance of money and the questionable mistakes she made in adding up, always taking the shilling at tenpence and thus getting into endless trouble with the tradespeople, whom she angered by her inability to understand their explanations. Her ignorance also, of how things ought to be done, and of how economies might be made, was another fruitful topic among the housewives. In fact, the mess that she made of it altogether, and the unsatisfactory nature of her whole individuality, were the standing texts for local discussion and the carpet which every one helped to brush. Oakhurst had not had such a dish of gossip for many a long day; and it is only doing Oakhurst justice to say that it made the best of its fare.

Meanwhile, the subject of all this uncharitable talk, safely chambered in the fool's paradise of her own creation, lived in those radiant dreams where we find so much happiness while they last, and before that inevitable dissipation into nothingness comes. She neither heard nor heeded the bitter voices following her feet. Was she not Armine's beloved? What then to her was all the world standing without the Golden Gate? Just what to you is the barking of the cur in the far distance—just that, and no more!

And as one expression of her content she intended to make herself English all through, and to be what she had promised—a help to Armine. She had even come to the humiliating grace, or servanthood, as she still thought it, and played at good house-keeping as the fine ladies of the French court once played at bucolic and shepherding. She put on a big apron and did a little dusting in the drawing-room; and she put on a pair of Armine's gloves and tried her hand at gardening. But she broke one or two things on the chimney-piece, and she rooted out the seedling annuals in the borders; so that on the whole her activities were rather more damaging than profitable in the general account.

What was more to her taste, as well as more within the circle of her possibilities, was the Englishhood of long walks in the lanes and fields; whence she returned with a clear skin, the sense of blood set flowing freely through her veins, and her hands full of wild flowers, which made her look like some semi-divine Pagan nymph laden with the offerings of her worshippers.

And to be able to ramble about with more complete satisfaction in her nationality, she bought an expensive walking-costume to save her shabby gowns, and a pretty little jaunty 'toque' to save her still shabbier hats.

She had to submit to a bad quarter of an hour when she told her husband what she had done, and called on him to admire and approve; while he, very kindly but quite plainly, told her that, although he admired beyond measure, he could not approve even in the least. She must make no more such purchases for the future, he said quietly; his slender finances would not bear even so small an extra strain as this.

'Am I never to have a new dress, Armine?' said Ione, her head erect. 'Other girls marry with a trousseau; I had nothing. You cannot be so poor as not to be able to afford me a simple little costume like this!'

'Unfortunately I am, dear,' he answered. 'You should have everything you wished if I could afford it.'

'Oh, you can!' she said positively. 'And if you cannot I will save it out of the housekeeping.'

'Yes?' said Armine, with a half-sad, half-incredulous smile; for that housekeeping was already a tangled bit of thorny ground between them.

The weekly bills were far in excess of the weekly earnings, but Ione professed herself unable to curtail them below their present average; and the theory that what keeps one will keep two was on all fours with that of her help in practical management, whereby she broke the chimney ornaments and rooted out the seedling annuals.

But in spite of this outbreak of extravagance in the matter of the walking-dress, and for all that her endeavours after notable servanthood were defective, Ione did faithfully desire to do her duty, and to be a help as well as a pleasure to Armine. How indeed should she not, loving him as she did, and when she herself—as she was so sure!—was the one sole-beloved of his past as the one sole-adored of his present.

The one sole-adored of his present; true; true as the life that throbs on the earth and shouts up to heaven in the sea—true as eternity—true as the divine. And yet, even to her, so certain as she was—and contented as certain—he sometimes seemed curiously preoccupied, nay almost cold, for a man whose love was so passionate as, in her faith and fancy, was his. Had not her eyes been so full of the effulgence of her own passion she would have seen that she did not possess his. But she put down these moments of voiceless discomfort to the score of his regret that she was poorer than his love for her would have had her. And in this belief she not only forgave what at times looked almost like thinly veiled irritation, and at times was only somewhat frozen

coldness, but even carried it to the account of his love and paid interest on it by increased idolatry.

How madly she loved him, and with what reckless prodigality she showered that love for ever and for ever over him! If only she would become the wife and sink the mistress! thought Armine, when she proffered him those wild caresses which he had to return as best he might, though in truth he shrank from them as from the touch of hot iron. The imperiousness, too, lying underneath even her love, galled him. She treated him too much as her possession, and held him as a child holds a bird, which for very delight she half-throttles and wholly tortures. When, in the evening, she made him seat himself on a lower chair by her side, while she passed her arm round his neck and held his head against her heart, kissing his forehead, his eyes, his coal-black curls as if her lips would never be weary of their worship, her eyes adoring him as if he had been a delicate kind of Apollo whose godhead was unquestionable, though his health was decidedly not Olympian—though, of course, as he said to himself, he was grateful for her love, as indeed what man would not be?—he was yet conscious that he only longed to free himself from her and to shake off, if he could for ever, the caressing grasp of that burning, beautiful, but not delightful hand. His thoughts were with his patients, if he had self-control; if he had not, then they were with that inner self which stood between Monica and Sorrow—that mournful Triad which was his real life. In any case they were not with Ione save when she compelled him to speak to her—she speaking to him with that sweet passion in her voice which means even more than a caress—that sweet passion which he could only answer back with an effort! When she kept him in the morning, as he was starting on his first rounds, while she intoned her unechoed psalm of love, it needed some forbearance not to unclasp her hands—not to put aside those strong, young clinging arms—not to say to her with cruel wisdom that life is too prosaic for these perpetual wanderings into enchanted woods, and that he must go on his millhorse way to make bread for the day's needs. If only she would leave off this embarrassing worship, this unceasing devotion, and fall into the quietude of wifely companionship and domestic monotony! If only she would! It was so hard to pass a lifetime in feigning—never to have a moment's respite from these fervent demonstrations, which he could meet only by lies!—it was so maddening to receive so much and to give back nothing! The temporary enchantment of that fatal moment beneath the carrubra-tree had long since past; the flush of a man's natural pride for a woman's almost unsought love—of gratitude for her coming to him as Ione had come—had also died away; and nothing now remained but the chill of the collapse and the bitterness of the truth.

Of all miserable husbands in England Armine St. Claire was

at this time the most miserable; but, true to the gentle conscientiousness of his character, he did his best to hide his self-inflicted misery from the wife whose only fault towards him was the exuberance of her love, and to keep the golden gate of that fool's paradise fast closed. He had an uneasy kind of feeling that things were insecure in more directions than one, and a presentiment that the future would see a whole brood of cockatrices hatched about their feet. Meanwhile he was considerate, self-restrained, patient, doing his best to forget the past and to keep his face turned bravely to the present—and the future. And as he was circumspect to prudery, and kept his eyes in leash and his tongue in check, Ione's unsleeping jealousy found no weak place on which to fasten; and thus far things were peaceful between them.

So there the two stood—Ione believing herself to be absolutely and supremely beloved by Armine, and showing him her own love as if there could be no mistake in the answer; and Armine doing his best to leave her that belief undisturbed—the one self-deceived and torturing, the other honourably deceiving and self-tortured.

Out of doors things looked rather doubtful. The second set were not sympathetic; and only Monica spoke of the Oakhurst bride with an admiring friendliness of tone which many heard with surprise, in view of that difference of position so patent, so pronounced, and which betrayed to no one the fact that a heart-throb had ever been between her and Armine. Only Theodosia suspected that beneath this smooth outside lay a hidden world of regrets; and that what looked so like the interest of personal indifference was in reality the policy of resignation. Her sharp little head full of its busy thoughts, she watched and waited. Her own *engouement* for St. Claire having passed, she was terribly bitter to him, as is the way with great ladies who have condescended and not been caught, beckoned and not been answered. She said he had shown bad taste and ingratitude in bringing home an Anglo-Sicilian wife. Why bad taste, why ingratitude, it would have been hard for her to have explained. She was never good at close reasoning; and though she spoke ill of Armine as if she really had some foothold for her spring, she could never go to the root of things, nor reveal the true shape of the *Causa causans*. She only called him conceited and Ione detestable; and when Mrs. Barrington asked Why? she merely tossed up her small sharp chin, and answered shrilly, 'Never mind why! He *is* conceited, mamma; and she *is* detestable;' and there let the matter lie.

She and Anthony held themselves aloof from the young people after the first formal leaving of cards. And they were induced to do this little act of courtesy only by the earnest advocacy of Edward Formby, the quiet pleading of Monica, and Mrs. Barrington's graver desire. Had it not been for this pressure from



without they would have ignored the St. Claires' existence; and in the exalted social status of the Barrington family no one would have wondered at the omission.

Edward Formby stood with Monica and Mrs. Barrington; but Miss Maria Crosby joined hands with Mrs. Anthony, and found no more good in either husband or wife than the Jerusalemites found in the Nazarenes. She too held that Armine St. Claire had been strangely wanting in duty to the neighbourhood by this hasty marriage with a foreigner; and in consequence she withdrew her patronage and made shift to exist without that daily medical attendance which she had found so vitally necessary in times past. She had been so long under medical treatment, she said, when she spoke of this withdrawal, she was almost a doctor herself by now, and could get along quite as well without such a young and inexperienced man as that St. Claire as with him. She had always thought him too young, she added plaintively; saying this even to Jane Winter.

But Jane, who never let things pass in silence when she thought they ought to be thrashed out in words, said sharply:

'La, Maria, that does go beyond me! You who stood out that he was just a miracle and had not a fault to his name—that, young or not young, he was simply perfection—to go back on your word like this and pretend that you thought him this, that, and the other all along—no, that is what I cannot put up with! What do you say, Rachel?'

'I think Aunt Maria forgets,' said Rachel.

'Then your aunt Maria does not forget,' retorted the invalid. 'And your aunt Maria knows quite as well as other people what she thinks and says. The young man was all very well at the first, but he got conceited and stuck up; and this wicked marriage just shows what he is made of.'

'La, Maria, why is it wicked?' asked Jane, with a wink to her friend Rachel.

'Because I did not take against him from the very first, as you all did,' continued Maria, not noticing the question; 'because I gave him a chance to show himself, you make out that I am a turncoat. I am no more a turncoat than any one else; and so I tell you!' she added with an hysterical sob.

'La, Maria, how can you go off about such a trifle as this?' said Jane disdainfully. 'I never did see such a crying girl as you are. Anything will set you off! What does it signify to any of us what the young man and his wife are like? We do not live in their pockets!'

'Then don't reproach me with being a turncoat!' said Maria with tearful anger.

'Who did, I should like to know?' said Jane.

'Both of you!' said Maria.

Jane Winter and Rachel Major looked at each other, and Jane sniffed, while Rachel said mildly:

‘La, Aunt Maria, how you do go on to be sure!’ And Aunt Maria, who had whimpered as the prelude, now wept as the finale, of this oft-enacted scene of familiar discord.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

### FACE TO FACE.

It had to come. Put off for a time by this good chance and that, it yet was in the order of fated things that Armine and Monica should meet each other alone, when no third person was by to enforce reserve by the fear of self-betrayal and to make restraint the safeguard against detection. Each dreaded the meeting, and both tried to avoid it; but in spite of their endeavours it came upon them unawares, and in a manner which they were helpless to prevent.

The lodge-keeper, who was also the head gardener, at the Tower House—that tyrant Mawve, who called the garden his, and forbade the ladies to think it theirs—had rheumatic fever, and Dr. St. Claire was of course in attendance. He had been there once or twice without seeing any one from the House, when one day going at an unexpected hour he fell on Monica passing in at the gate just as he was leaving the Lodge. So now the thing had come upon them, and escape was impossible.

Blanched cheeks and ashen lips; his voice roughened and hers difficult to manage; their eyes not frankly meeting but glancing evasively—away into space, down on the ground, up to the sky, at the shoulder, the forehead, the throat—anywhere but into each other; the sense of shame and dishonour on his part—of disappointment in her ideal, but of divine pity and tender forgiveness on hers; these were the signs and emotions of that first meeting, face to face, of those who had loved without hope, but with the unspoken promise of fidelity to that dream which could never be translated into living happiness.

Coming together as they did, they were obliged to speak so that Mrs. Mawve, standing there with the gate in her hand, should not see in them any shyness or reluctance which might set her thinking. It was painful and embarrassing enough; but when the woman, called querulously by her husband, had run into the lodge, and they were free from the control of her presence, some strange kind of strength seemed to come into Monica, so that she shook off her nervousness as she would have shaken off untimely sleep, and was once more natural, unaffected, and herself.

She had to be strong enough for both; for his agitation in-

creased as hers passed; and the more power over herself she gained, the less he seemed able to command.

They had exchanged those trivialities about the weather which are the refuge of the conversationally stranded, when Monica suddenly said, as if touching the secret sore boldly:

'I hope Mrs. St. Claire does not find the climate very bad here in England?'

Armine felt as if she had struck him in the face; but he answered as well as he was able—doing his best to appear as if his wife's name in Monica's mouth was a mere nothing:

'She seems pleased with everything English—even with the climate.'

'Yet it must be so different from that of Sicily,' said Monica.

She intended to talk of Ione till she had worn down all embarrassment and talked the subject into familiarity.

'Yes, it is,' said Armine.

'The summer here is not much better than the winter there—is it not so?' continued Monica. 'Your wife must feel this to be almost winter.'

'It is a magnificent climate—almost perfect,' said Armine.

'How you must have enjoyed it!' said Monica, with a rather forced accent of lightness and sympathetic pleasure. 'But poor Mrs. St. Claire! She must feel the change.'

'Novelty is always amusing,' was the vague and safe reply.

'I hope it will not be only novelty with her,' persisted Monica. 'I hope she will be as happy as she is now, even when the first freshness has worn off and she has grown accustomed to everything.'

'Yes,' said Armine.

He could scarcely say less.

'She seems so delighted with everything, it is quite refreshing to see her!' continued Monica.

'She ought to be a little happy now—she was unhappy enough at her own home,' said Armine hastily.

Loyal to Ione as he intended ever to be, he yet wished to make Monica understand how much pity had had to do with his marriage. Perhaps she would see that, if he dwelt on Ione's domestic misery at Palermo.

'I am sorry to hear that,' she said. Then she looked into Armine's face, bravely, straightly, steadfastly. 'But now all that has passed away,' she said: 'and I am very, very glad that both you and she are so happy!'

It was in his impulse to cry out against this congratulation—to say to her as she stood there, before him, so strenuously renouncing the past and denying the truth of things: 'I am the most miserable wretch that lives. I love you, and I do not love her—and my heart is breaking for you and not gladdened by her.'

But honour to the woman whom he had married, respect for the woman whom he loved, and the manliness which accepts the consequences of one's own actions, let them be what they will, all held him back, and with an effort he said huskily, 'Thank you!' no more. He accepted her sympathy with his happiness because of his union with Ione; and so let it pass as fact and sincerity.

It was the same kind of day, with its pale yellow sunlight and subdued colouring, as that on which they had met and parted, mutely confessed and dumbly renounced, in this garden less than a year ago—less than a year ago, counting by months and days, but what an eternity, judging by events and feelings! The outward circumstances of the place were the same now as then. The fountain still flung up its 'loosening silver' in the sunlight, the flower-scents perfumed the air, the peacocks screamed on the walks; the dark yew-trees grew in their formal close-set alleys—all was the same to sight and hearing. The only things changed were themselves; his right of aspiration, hers of denial—his right of despair, hers of dreams—and the fact of Ione in place of the ideal of love.

No words were needed to tell how vividly each remembered their last interview in the garden. It came like a picture before them, like an echo, like a reflection. But Monica felt that this picture must be defaced and a new tracing made over the old lines—the echo must be silenced once and for ever. There would be no living else, sacrilege to love and the past as it might be. But sacrilege to love is sometimes sacrifice to virtue; and so it was to-day.

'Will you come up the steps with me and see my mother?' said Monica, standing at the wicket-gate which led to the lowest terrace and the fountain facing the steps.

How gentle and yet how resolute she was! He hesitated for a second before he answered. Then he said:

'Yes, I will go up with you and see Mrs. Barrington;' he too as desirous as she, if less resolute, to destroy the past and establish the present firm and solid on the ruins.

'She will be glad to see you,' said Monica, turning into the terrace, backed by its close-clipped yews and brightened by its sparkling fountain.

They came to the steps and went up—each step representing a feeling on which they trod—a phrase in the living page of their unpublished love which both did their best to score out. When they came to that where their last interview had ended, he stopped for a moment. The agony which possessed him held his feet so that he could not move. He felt as if his life were going from him, as if he must scorn his manhood and despise his honour, and burst into the passionate tears of a love-lorn and broken-hearted woman.

Monica, hearing the halt, turned to look at him; and thus they were in the same relative positions as before—she above and he below—he looking up at her and she gazing down at him. It was the old time repeated in the new; but only as a lifeless statue repeats the features of the dead beloved.

When Monica looked at him, she saw that his eyes were full of tears.

‘To-morrow, when you come to see poor Mawe, you must bring Mrs. St. Claire with you,’ she said steadily. ‘She has never seen our quaint old garden, and I shall be glad to show it to her. Will you bring your wife to see me to-morrow, Dr. St. Claire?’

Her words roused him as she intended they should. He shook off the weakness that had fallen on him, as she had shaken off hers, angry with himself in that he had so far failed in the presence of one whose respect was the only thing now left him.

‘Thank you, yes, I will,’ he said, with curiously sudden steadfastness.

‘I want her to feel at home here, and that my mother and I are her friends,’ said Monica.

‘How good you are! How angelic!’ said Armine, almost as if speaking to himself.

‘Why?’ asked Monica, with a smile that sought to appear playful, and that was so sad instead. ‘Because I want you to bring your wife here to see us as often as possible, and because I want to know her better? Any one would wish that, I should think—such a beautiful creature as she is!’ she added with forced lightness.

‘I am glad that you feel you shall like her,’ said Armine.

‘And I hope that she will like us and feel that we are her friends, both my mother and myself,’ returned Monica.

‘She will need friends, poor girl!’ said Armine sadly. ‘The whole thing is so misfitting!’

‘You must not think of that,’ replied Monica hurriedly. ‘Oakhurst is not worthy of her, I know, but your friends must rally round you and make her happy. She must not feel that anything is misfitting, except the climate—and that we cannot help!’ she added with a smile that strove hard to be playful and was as sad as her former had been.

‘It has all been——’

‘A little sudden, but quite intelligible, when one has once seen her,’ interrupted Monica. ‘And just because it was so sudden and so intelligible, we must do our best to make her feel that she has come among friends, and to a true home.’

‘Your goodness is more than I deserve,’ said Armine, his face convulsed with pain. ‘I who must seem to you so worthless!’

In spite of herself the tears gathered in Monica’s eyes, but she



brushed them away under cover of putting back her hair. Then she turned her face steadily to the man in whom she had believed—the man whom she had loved as devotees love their saint, worshippers their god—the man of whose hastily married young wife she was speaking as one might have spoken of a sister.

‘Why do you say that?’ she said. ‘Your affairs are your own, not ours. If it pleased you to marry rather more suddenly than is usual, that is your own matter only, and we have no right even to criticise. It is morbid to call yourself worthless for that, Dr. St. Claire. And that is the only fact in your marriage with which any one could find fault—the only,’ she repeated. But though she tried, she could not look at him when she said this.

Pride, prudence, virtue, all dictated those few words as if they had been a material barrier raised between her and the man she had loved; but nature and truth were stronger than these others, and—she could not look at him while she spoke.

‘I understand,’ said Armine in a low voice. ‘You are right.’

It was almost five o’clock, and tea was on the well-known tea-table, in just the same place and with just the same arrangements and conditions as used to be in the days that were gone—never to return. Mrs. Barrington, in her old place, received her former protégé with her own sweet courtesy; but yet with a certain coldness instead of what had once been almost maternal kindness. His marriage had distressed and annoyed her. It was so selfish, so unwise! In his state of health, and with only such an income as could be got out of the Oakhurst practice, to marry this beautiful young woman, who might have done so much better, was, she thought, the very acme of manly selfishness. It was the way in which the world judges, and the conclusions to which it comes when it reasons on appearances only without knowledge of facts.

‘I hope Mrs. St. Claire is well?’ she said to her former favourite, a little, very little, frostily.

‘Yes; quite; thank you,’ he answered.

‘And happy in her new conditions?’

‘Yes,’ he said again.

‘I am glad of that. It shows that she is adaptable,’ said Mrs. Barrington kindly. ‘What a remarkably pretty person she is! Pretty is scarcely the word,’ she added, correcting herself. ‘Handsome I should rather have said.’

‘You admire her? I am glad,’ said Armine.

‘And you admire her too, I suppose,’ said Mrs. Barrington with a smile, meaning to be playful and pleasant.

He forced himself to smile too, in sympathy with her humour.

‘Yes, I admire her,’ he answered, speaking as lightly as he could.

‘Has she brothers and sisters?’ asked Mrs. Barrington, who wanted to hear all about the young bride, of whom no one in the place knew more than the name.

'No; she has no brothers at all, only an adopted sister,' answered Armine.

'I suppose her parents will be coming over to see her in her new home?' she asked again.

'I scarcely think so,' was his reply.

'No? Well, it is a long way from Palermo!' she said.

'Yes, a very long way,' he answered. Then, remembering that Mrs. Barrington must some day learn the truth, he thought it better to confess what he might in honour, and put an end so far as he could to a misapprehension which hurt him and did no one any good. 'The fact is,' he said, with a certain hesitation that seemed to conceal as much as it told, 'my poor wife has neither father nor mother, nor any blood relations at all. She was only the adopted daughter of Captain Stewart, and neither she nor I know more of her family than this—which you see is substantially nothing.'

'Oh!' said Mrs. Barrington, a little shocked and scandalised.

She had thought St. Claire selfish in marrying Ione, when his marriage seemed to have prevented the girl's better chances; now she thought it wrong to himself to have taken a young woman without name or family—a waif and stray thrown by the tide no one knew whence nor how—a creature born of the darkness and existing only by a kind of reflected light. It was scarcely what was due to them. They had deserved more consideration at his hands than this introduction among them of a nameless and therefore doubtful young person, who might—who knows?—be one of those miserable beings who are antenatally tainted by their parents' dishonour.

'I know what you think,' then said Armine, watching her. 'It was a foolish marriage for both of us. I acknowledge it. You cannot feel it more than I do; but, believe me, it was one of those things for which no one is responsible. It is too long a story to go into now, but I am sure you will believe me when I say that I was less foolish, less blameable, than you might imagine. Spare me the details, but trust my assurance. You will, will you not?'

He went over to her and took her hand in both of his, in the old caressing and yet respectful way which had been his charm in times past. His pale face and earnest eyes pleaded with her for belief and generous judgment. He cared little enough for what others might think, but Mrs. Barrington's trust in him, her sympathy with him, her condonation—hers, and therefore Monica's—were as dear to him as life itself. In one sense indeed they were his very life.

'Yes, I will believe you,' said Mrs. Barrington after a pause, and somewhat with the feeling of lowering her guard. 'The marriage, as it stands, looks worse than foolish, but I will credit

you with good intentions—or at least with no unworthy ones. And after all'—here she pressed his hand and smiled—'it is not my business to interfere in your affairs.'

'It is the business of a friend to be satisfied that nothing has been done to forfeit esteem,' said Armine.

'I am sure you have done nothing to forfeit mine,' said Mrs. Barrington kindly.

'Thank you. That is all I ask,' he returned. 'Believe only that I was overtaken by circumstances which did not leave me a free agent, and that I was not so mad as I seem to have been.'

He turned to Monica as he said this, and their eyes met. He had spoken for her as much as for her mother, and she had understood him. Now she knew so much of the truth as he wished her to know. It had not been the vulgar levity of a shallow nature which had warped him from the higher law of barren honour and fruitless faith. There was some mystery underneath, which she could not fathom, but which, if known, would exonerate him. In spite of Ione's naïve confession she knew that this love at first sight was a myth, and that there had been no wilful departure from that unspoken troth which had not made herself and Armine lovers but which yet had left them bound. She was glad for the sake of that ideal which is the dearest part of the beloved. It was not the mere flesh and blood, the mere grace and beauty of Armine, that she had loved; but that loveliness of the soul, that brightness and beauty of the divine nature, which had been the very life of his humanity to her. This obscured, her love must needs die out in weeping for the lost; but while she could respect and believe in him, she held the essential part—and the rest might go.

Yet how sorry she was for him, and even more sorry for Ione! If that marriage had been made by circumstances and not by choice, some day the poor young wife would have to suffer—some day the veil would drop and she would learn the truth which was evidently hidden from her now. One side of that truth, however, she must never learn; and for her own part Monica resolved more firmly than ever that she would make herself Ione's friend and do her best for her in Oakhurst all through.

'You are very good to have confided so much to my mother,' she said in her gentle way to St. Claire. 'We shall hold it sacred to ourselves, of course.'

'I know that I may trust you,' said St. Claire, scarcely able to speak at all.

'Now let us forget all this and turn to something—I will not say less painful, but less embarrassing,' said Mrs. Barrington. 'Will you sing to me, Dr. St. Claire? I have heard no music like yours since you left. Sing one of those dear little songs I used to like so much. It will be like old times!'

She asked this as a token of her forgiveness and his rehabilitation; as a sign that his old place of favourite was still warm and open to him, and that the future was to be as the past had been.

He would rather she had asked him to do himself some grave personal injury.

'I am out of voice and out of practice,' he said, turning pale.

But Mrs. Barrington's dim vision failed to note his change of colour, and his voice did not betray all the reluctance that he felt.

'I will forgive your want of voice,' she said, smiling very sweetly. 'It is good enough to be able to lose something and yet retain more than others have.'

'You are very good,' he answered; but he did not move.

'I think the piano is in tune,' said Monica, going to it and striking a few chords as she stood over the keys.

He obeyed the request conveyed in the action and sat down in the old place, where he had so often sung his love to Monica and breathed in hers as the echo. Now he had only a threnody to give, and a requiem to receive.

After a few preliminary notes he sang, to a new arrangement, Shelley's mournful poem, 'When the lamp is shattered,' and with difficulty finished it creditably and without a self-confessed breakdown. Monica too had need of all her philosophy; but the horror that lies in a good girl's heart at the thought of conscious love for another woman's husband helped her so far that she was able to say with quiet composure: 'What a pretty arrangement! Whose is it?' as if the mechanical run of the notes and how the sharps and flats fell had been of more account than the feeling and the words.

'It is my own,' he said, rising from the piano.

'How very pretty it is!—how very sweet!' said Mrs. Barrington. 'Where did you compose it?'

'At Palermo,' he said, not looking at Monica.

'And after you knew and loved your pretty wife you should have taken that other—that Indian song—and have put to music the "spirit in your feet" which led you to her window,' said Monica in rather a hurried manner.

'Yes,' he said, accepting the reproof. 'I ought, but I did not.'

'It would please her if you did,' said Monica steadily.

'I am afraid I have no time now,' answered St. Claire, pained in spite of himself and his better reason.

But after all she was right. What was his duty now but to please Ione? She was his wife; he had undertaken obligations towards her; and Monica was but a shadow and a dream—nothing more substantial than a photograph nor more tangible than a rainbow! Yes, she was right. He had lost the right to love her,

but he still retained that of desiring her respect, her trust, her confidence. He would prove himself worthy to possess the sole treasures left him. He would devote himself to ensuring Ione's happiness. That was the only thing for an honest man to do. The duty was clear enough to his perceptions: a duty constructed solid and four-square by his intellect. Nevertheless the means seemed to him doubtful, oppressed as he was by his wife's wild love and broken-hearted for want of Monica's—unable to return the one and forbidden all hope of the other—like a man dying for fresh air to whom is given the stifling heat of a stove-house instead.

## CHAPTER XXV.

### IN THE WOOD.

THE jaunty little toque and fashionable walking-costume had not been bought for the mere pleasure of keeping them locked up in the wardrobe. Determined to be English all through, Ione, as has been said, indolent in Palermo, was energetic at Oakhurst and spent much of her time in taking long walks in the country—always on the road where she thought she might meet her husband, and perhaps induce him to leave his trap and return with her on foot.

She had no fear of these long lonely walks. England was not like Sicily, she thought. There were no brigands to carry one off into the mountains till a ruinous ransom was forthcoming; the roads were safe and the liberties of women respected. The freedom for which she had longed all her life she might therefore profit by now when she had the chance. And she did; to her heart's desire.

One day she went out as usual. This time she did not take the highway. Armine had gone to Moss Farm, about six miles off by the London road, but only three by the fields and through the wood, where a man could ride but not drive. And she thought that, if she went by the shorter way, she should find her beloved at the other end, when she would make him walk back with her through those lovely meadows, that fragrant wood. He was always so good—he did all she asked him to do! As indeed was but his duty, was her next thought; pride traversing her love as a line of steel might pass through a silken web. It was her right to receive all where she had given all—her right to be obeyed where command included claim and obedience was translated gratitude. She had sacrificed everything for him and his love; it was only just, then, that he should sacrifice his will when it ran counter to hers, and return in as full measure as she had bestowed.



She loved him. Yes; that was beyond question. All the same, she knew her rights and held by them.

Beautiful always, Ione looked supremely lovely to-day. Her spell of mental rest and happiness in her paradise—what mattered it if a fool's or no?—had told on her as sleep tells on the weary and worn-out.

Her moral wrinkles were smoothed out and her former chronically discontented look was lost in one of perfected felicity. Her nervous irritability of temper was in abeyance, and her manner was less watchful for causes of offence than of old. She was rounder, softer, sweeter altogether; perhaps less exciting because less complex in mood; more satisfactory and less inexplicable; but with always more than enough of that hidden fire, that mysterious attraction, which makes men mad for other women than Helen, than Cleopatra, than Circe. There was always that reserve fund of nameless possibilities in her which excites some and wearies others. No one ever felt to have got to the depths—to have thoroughly plumbed and sounded her; no one ever felt to have mastered and subdued her; and she was always herself and uninfluenced by the will of others. Even Armine was conscious that she gave voluntary service for the pleasure of love, rather than submission for the grace of duty. She was complaisant because she was strong, not because she was humble; and when she appeared to be most devoted, it was then that she was most self-assertive. As now, when she took these long lone country walks that she might meet her husband at the end and make him go back with her on foot, no matter what were his professional duties nor what was his personal reluctance—the action which looked so like womanly devotion was in fact the arbitrariness of self-will. There is a world of difference between the love which pleases itself in loving, and the love which seeks the pleasure of the beloved.

Ione was walking through the wood, delighting in the balmy freshness of the day, and mentally contrasting this delicious air with the scorching heat of Palermo at this same hour and time, when she came to one of those natural seats made by the forking stems of two beech-trees, with which we are all familiar. How lovely it was, with its golden-green cushions of moss, where the fronds of the polypody and the maidenhair spleenwort stood up like knightly plumes, and the tender little leaflets of the wild wood-sorrel were like smooth silken rosettes set against knotted velvet! How beautiful it all was, and how peaceful! She was just a little tired—she must rest there for a moment before going on. She had time; and she should not miss her darling.

She sat down on this cushioned seat, dreaming of Armine and linking memory to love. She thought of that moment under the carruba-tree when he bent forward and kissed the back of her

neck—there where the golden sun had touched the golden curl. She remembered the rush of joy that had struck through her like an electric shock—how every nerve and fibre had quivered with ecstasy at knowing herself beloved—she who had loved him without his prayer and beside her own hope, now feeling herself clasped in his arms and held strained to his heart! She remembered his eyes when she had looked into them, how they seemed to be verily divine, and how his beauty had put on an almost supernatural glory—how at that moment she seemed to have passed away from the ordinary life of man and to have come into the place where she had found God; and her heart beat with strong, quick, full pulsations as she pictured it all so vividly as to make her feel that she was living through the moment once more. Then her thoughts wandered onward; and, memory conjuring up the sweetest moments by the way, she stopped at last at the present time and the immediate future of to-day.

She would bring Armine back with her through the wood, and they would sit here for a while—in England under the beech-tree as a replica of the time when they had sat in Palermo under the carruba. She had made out all the circumstances of this little idyllic love-scene to herself;—how she would put her arms round him, and he would put his round her;—how she would lay her head on his shoulder, her face upturned so that her lips should almost touch his cheek—almost, not quite, like a promise not yet claimed—a sweet warm challenge to be perforce accepted. And then she seemed to feel the fragrance of his lips on hers—those dear kisses which he always gave when asked. She forgot, poor Ione! to remember that they were never given unless asked for. She would draw his head down on her lap and pass her hand among his curls. And he would let her have her will of him and love him as much as she would. All the same, to have her will of him in all things was her right.

She was half asleep with the heat and the delicious dream conjured up like an acted drama before her, when an unkempt, ragged, brutal-looking man came slouching past, and, stopping in front of her, asked for alms in a tone that was more a menace than a supplication.

Ione was one of those women whose courage comes from temper. Before her pride was touched she was timid and afraid. Her blood curdled round her heart as this rude, rough man, standing in an insolent attitude before her, demanding alms in a menacing voice, and with something in his face that was half a leer and half a threat, made her suddenly feel her helplessness and his power, her loneliness and his audacity. Yet this was England; and there are no brigands in England!

‘*Vatene via!*’ she said, startled into the familiar phrase.

Her foreign tongue emboldened the man yet more. It gave

him the impression of isolation—that she did not belong to them anyhow, and that the law, which might have protected or avenged a native-born Englishwoman, would not take cognisance of a stranger.

‘I don’t understand yer, mum,’ he said insolently, advancing a step nearer.

‘Go away!’ cried Ione, in the shrill high-pitched voice of fear.

‘Ye’ll please to give me something afore I do,’ he returned.

‘You are insolent. I have nothing,’ she said.

‘You have some pretty shiners there,’ said the man, rudely touching the locket on her throat.

Ione sprang to her feet, and struck the man’s face with the back of her hand.

‘Insolent! how dare you!’ she exclaimed, her blood now up.

He caught her by her two arms and forced her backward, pinioning her in his strong grasp and pressing her against the bole of the tree.

‘You’ll excuse me, mum, but you’ll please to give them to me,’ he said coarsely. ‘I want them a sight more nor you.’

As he spoke he loosened one of her arms, and with his disengaged hand tore the locket from the chain. It was that in which she had placed *Armine’s* hair.

Ione gave one piercing shriek, and, as if in answer to her cry, she heard the sound of a horse’s hoofs coming back through the wood towards her—there where she stood pressed back against the tree, and her locket, in which part of the very substance of *Armine’s* dear body was enshrined, in this ruffian’s grasp. The man heard it too, and, like some beast of prey startled in his pursuit, he suddenly released her; and with one bound was off and away into the wood, where, crouching down among the bracken and the undergrowth, he was lost to sight and hearing.

Then Edward Formby rode up, and Ione was safe.

When he saw her standing there, pale with fear, trembling with passion, her large eyes dark and flashing, her nostrils quivering and dilated, he drew rein and threw himself from his horse. Was hers the cry that he had heard?

‘Good God!’ he said impulsively; ‘what are you doing here alone? What has happened, Mrs. St. Claire? You are trembling; you are terrified—what is it?’

‘A brigand!’ said Ione, looking round into the wood. ‘He is there now. But he cannot hurt us; he had no gun.’

‘Some scoundrel has frightened you, I can see. But a brigand?’ said Edward.

‘Yes,’ answered Ione. ‘And I never thought of such a thing! I thought you had no brigands in England; but this wretch robbed me of my locket. It is desecration!’ she added fiercely, remembering what sacred treasure that small gold case held.

‘The scoundrel! He was some rascally tramp, and they are as bad as brigands,’ said Edward, in more agitation than was usual with him. ‘But what are you doing here alone? Where has that scoundrel gone? St. Claire should not let you wander about like this by yourself! It is not safe,’ he added in a hurried and disjointed way, as if he spoke all in one breath.

‘England is safe,’ said Ione a little proudly.

‘No, no! not to the extent of allowing ladies to take long country walks alone,’ he repeated. ‘We have no organised bands of brigands as you have in Sicily, but we have wandering tramps who are just as dangerous when they get the chance. What did this man do to you?’

‘He wanted me to give him money; and I had none if I would, and I would not if I had had it,’ said Ione. ‘Then he took hold of my arms—the wretch!’ she added, brushing her sleeves with her handkerchief as if to brush off some pollution from her person; ‘and then’—and here her voice deepened and roughened out of all likeness to its ordinary tones—‘he tore my locket from my neck.’

‘The villain! the scoundrel!’ cried Edward, furious and agitated. ‘Which way did he go? Up there?’

He hitched the bridle of his horse to a bough, and turned to follow the trace of the man made by the broken brushwood and trampled bracken; but Ione caught his arm. The horse, which was a spirited chestnut, was plunging violently; and she was afraid both of the beast’s heels and to be left alone with the possibility of the hidden brigand making a descent on her, or perhaps of assassinating Mr. Formby.

‘Don’t go,’ she said, with a curious mixture of command and entreaty. ‘I don’t want you to go.’

‘But that scoundrel!’ pleaded Edward, whose fighting blood was up.

‘Oh, let him alone! he is in the wood somewhere. He had no gun, but he might have a revolver. You are better here with me. And I do not like your horse.’

‘I will not leave you if you would rather not,’ said Edward reluctantly.

He was sorry to give up the chase and the instant chastisement with his own hands which would have been so soothing to his superior manhood; but he promised himself that the ruffian should be watched for, and, when caught, trounced as a magistrate can always trounce a vagrant when he will. Meanwhile, perhaps it was his duty to remain with Mrs. St. Claire. She looked pale; she had asked him to stay; and the chestnut might do himself some harm.

‘My dear Mrs. St. Claire, be advised by me and warned by this disagreeable adventure,’ he said, after he had soothed his

horse; thinking that, if he could not beat that brutal assailant of St. Claire's beautiful young wife into a jelly, as he deserved, he would utilise the time by profitable sermonising. 'Do not take these long country walks alone! You must not! Indeed you must not! They are not safe. Where on earth were you going? What were you doing here by yourself?'

'I was going to Moss Farm to meet my husband,' said Ione. 'And why should I not come here? I have been all through the wood before.'

'Then your husband should not allow it,' said Edward Formby, dropping his stone into deeper waters than he knew of.

'My husband does not allow me to do anything. I am my own mistress. I am free to do as I like,' said Ione haughtily.

'To be free to run into dangers of which you can know nothing is but a poor kind of liberty,' said Edward manfully. 'My idea of a husband's duty is that he should protect his wife—take care of her and look after her.'

'And how can my husband protect and look after me as you call it—as if I were a little dog—when he is obliged to go to those horrid patients of his—when he is obliged to be hours away and miles off?' cried Ione with flashing eyes, up in arms for the integrity of her beloved as well as in defence of her own freedom, and glad to be able to lash out against circumstances which annoyed her in proportion to their inevitability.

'Of course. He has his profession; I forgot. That makes a difference,' said Edward in an odd staccato manner. 'All the same, it is not safe for you to go so far away from houses, and to wander into these lonely places by yourself. You see what has happened to you to-day; and you can never be sure that the same thing may not happen again.'

'Then I might as well be back in Palermo!' said Ione contemptuously, and as if her companion were responsible for the whole thing. 'And I would rather trust myself to English tramps than to Sicilian carabinieri!' she added passionately—so passionately that the good fellow who had undertaken her enlightenment was suddenly himself enlightened so far as to know that he was stumbling over ploughshares and floundering in quicksands.

'At all events I must keep with you now,' he said, shifting his point. 'You have been frightened and your nerves are shaken——'

'They are not shaken the least in the world,' interrupted Ione.

'And you feel brave enough to go on alone, with the man in hiding in the wood?' asked Edward in frank amazement.

What an enigma she was! White with terror and just escaped from a very real danger, with her words of request for



protection yet warm on her lips, and now in a moment as proud and defiant as if that which had happened to her were mere child's play.

Ione had no intention of coquetry. She was too ardently in love with Armine for that ; for though love cooled down to friendship easily admits of a new passion, love at the boiling-point fills heaven and earth and time and space with its own fumes, and leaves no room for aught beside. Still her look and gesture were perilously like coquetry as she turned her glorious eyes to her companion, and said in the sweetest manner of sudden self-sur-render: 'You are very good ! Thank you. Yes, do come with me to Moss Farm, where I shall find my husband.'

Though she had so warmly defended her beloved against Edward's vague charge of neglect, yet she was not sorry that this last should accompany her as her protector against dangers which Armine had allowed her to run. She felt dimly and indistinctly that a little jealousy would be a wholesale condiment and useful spur. All men are the better for a little spur, and condiments are good in daily food. Even dearly beloved Armine might be wakened up to advantage.

'I was half asleep when that brigand came up to me,' she said, as they set their faces to the west, and walked on the way that led to Moss Farm.

'And that was imprudent,' said Edward, with a curiously strong desire to protect and inform this beautiful young wife of the man he called his friend.

'Why, you are worse than we are in Palermo,' cried Ione, with a little laugh, not unpleasant.

'Are you so bad there ?' he asked, smiling.

'In some things,' she answered.

'You may not walk in the woods alone ? or go to sleep under the trees in the middle of the day ?' he said lightly.

'Walk in the Favorita alone ? I or Clarissa ? Dio mio, no !' she returned. 'All the world would have been in a ferment if we had, and every one we knew would have called to beseech papa and mamma to put a stop to such iniquity. But then, no Palermitan lady walks alone at any time, and very few walk at all.'

'And you ?—did you rebel or conform ?' asked Edward.

'We were obliged to conform. We were brought up half like Sicilians, Clarissa and I ; and we were allowed very little more liberty than they. That made me long so much to come to England. I always felt as if I were in a prison at the Villa Clarissa. I longed so to be free !'

'Ah, you like liberty, I see ; perhaps a little too much,' said Edward.

'How can an English girl like it too much ?' she answered. 'It is that which makes us so much better than any one else.'

To which Edward Formby answered, 'Yes, it does ;' both a

little wide of the real meaning of the other. For Ione by no means held English girls so far superior to others; and Edward, who considered them the pink of creation, had just protested against their normal liberties. Like many men of his kind, his feeling for the women whom he did respect was one of almost exaggerated chivalry, almost excessive protection. Even to those whom he did not respect he was kind and considerate; for to be a woman was, to Edward Formby, to be entitled to all men's care and his own especial regard.

'I should have thought your father would have brought you up rather in the English than the Italian way,' he said, continuing the conversation as they walked along the wood-path. 'He was such a thorough Englishman in his time! As long as I can remember I have heard him spoken of as a kind of oracle for all manly sports, and I should have expected he would have carried the English flag all through.'

'You cannot in Sicily. People would say all sorts of things,' said Ione.

'Have you heard from them lately? Will you remember me kindly to him when you next write?' said Edward.

'I have not heard from them lately; and I am not going to write,' said Ione, suddenly stiff and glacial.

'Did you know your aunt Helen?' asked Edward, not conscious of offence.

'No,' she said.

'She was so beautiful! I remember her when I was a boy about ten years old. She must have been about nineteen or twenty then. She was so lovely! and you are something like her. I cannot say where or how, but you certainly remind me of her, vaguely, oddly, but unmistakably.'

'What nonsense!' said Ione abruptly.

'Why nonsense, Mrs. St. Claire?' he asked in surprise. 'Why should you not resemble your aunt?'

'Because she was not my aunt; because she was no relation to me at all,' said Ione; 'because I am not papa's daughter nor mamma's—only something adopted, no one knows why or from where.'

'Surely not,' said Edward, pained by her manner and shocked by her information.

'And since I am confessing to you, I might as well tell the whole truth. It will save trouble,' said Ione, in the same cynical and hard way as before. 'They did not want me to marry Armine, because he was poor; and they are very angry with me. So they do not write; and I shall never see them again.'

'I am very sorry,' said Edward after a pause. 'And I do not think St. Claire should have married in such a case as this.'

'Do not blame my husband!' said Ione, her eyes ablaze. 'He is perfect! I will not hear a word against him! never! never!'

‘Well, I will not blame him, dear Mrs. St. Claire,’ returned her companion in a soothing, apologetic way. ‘You are quite right—you are noble and true and womanly.’

‘Thank you,’ said Ione with sudden softness.

By this time they had come to the end of the wood and the gate of Moss Farm; but there was no trap, no sign of Armine; and, when Edward Formby went in to inquire, he was told that the doctor had been and gone again this good half-hour or more. So there was nothing for it but to walk back through the wood, with Edward Formby instead of Armine as her companion, along that fragrant glade and through that enchanted ground.

Ione could have wept for disappointment in her hope, and have blazed heaven-high in rage at being obliged to accept Edward’s protection at all. Since she could not have her husband’s she did not want *his*! She was very cross and almost as disagreeable as the Ione of Palermitan days; but Edward was a good dear obtuse kind of fellow, without suspicion and free from irritability, and bore his beautiful companion’s snubs with unruffled good-humour, thinking it only natural that she should be put out—and that Armine ought to have foreseen the whole affair and have waited for her till she came. And then he sighed. He did not know why. Perhaps it was because life looked a little dreary to him in that he had no large-eyed wife to be unpleasant to other fellows because disappointed of his own society.

When they passed the tree where Ione had conjured up her loving vision, and where, instead of a caress from her husband, she had been insulted by a ruffian, she found the place occupied by a ragged woman and a still more ragged child, the former of whom got up as the two drew near, and held out in her grimy hand Ione’s ravished locket.

‘Please ’m, I found this hard by. It don’t belong to me; maybe it belongs to you?’ she said, with that naturalness of manner which practice in deceit and acting makes perfect in beggars.

‘It is mine!’ cried Ione, snatching the locket from the dirty hand that held it. ‘And now you have spoilt it for ever by your vile touch!’ she added. And as she spoke she flung the trinket to the ground and set her heel on it till she had ground it into a shapeless mass of broken gold and splintered glass, and matted mud-besmeared threads of hair.

‘It was polluted!’ she said, her eyes like wells of living fire. ‘You wretch! you wretch! how dare you touch it! And how dare you sit there in that place?—Mr. Formby, strike her with your whip and send her off!’

But Edward did not take up those cudgels in Ione’s behalf and order the woman to move. That mossy seat between the forked stems of the beech-trees was public property, and even a beggar has public rights. He did, however, scare the woman by his

magisterial severity of speech, threatening the vague terrors of the law, and telling her that both she and her husband, the brute who had just now frightened the lady—oh! he knew him well enough!—should smart for it as they little expected. But Ione was, in her heart, indignant against him in that he had not avenged her sentimental outrage about the seat; and in token thereof she made herself more and more like a branch of thorns ail the way home.

As they were crossing the meadow they came on Miss Jane Wintergreen and Rachel Major taking a constitutional, as they often did together. The ladies bowed—Rachel's plain good face the colour of a dark-red dahlia; Jane's rather more jaundiced than usual. Edward raised his hat. Ione stared without bowing, and smiled insolently. She was of the kind whom personal sorrow makes bitter and inhuman; and just now her sorrow for the loss of her much-prized locket made her feel wolfish and misanthropic to all the world—and to these two ladies more than all others.

'What hideous creatures some English women can be!' she said, almost in hearing as she passed; just as Jane, jerking her head and giving a vicious look backwards, said, in her turn:

'My word! our fine madam is beginning early! The grass don't grow under her feet! I said she was bad the first day I saw her!'

Rachel did not speak. She had a stirred and startled look; and, like Jane, glanced backward, but not viciously.

'Shameful!' continued Jane. 'A young wife not two months married and carrying on in this audacious way!—flirting with Mr. Formby like anything!'

'I do not think our Mr. Formby is a man to flirt with a married woman, Jane,' said Rachel timidly; but her friend snapped at her, as her manner was.

'Men are men,' she said; 'and the best of them are no better than they should be. Edward Formby is no more a saint than his neighbours, and she is a hussy who has been brought up in foreign parts and cannot know aught of good.'

'Perhaps it is the way where she comes from,' said pacific Rachel.

'Then it is not ours, and she'll have to learn better. And our Mr. Formby shouldn't have done it,' said Jane.

'Well, I'm sure I don't know anything about it,' said Rachel. 'But I cannot believe that our Mr. Formby can do wrong.'

'Oh, trust him!' cried Jane, in her shrill way. 'But, goodness me, Rachel, why is your face so red? And, la, child, you have tears in your eyes!'

'It is weakness,' said Rachel hurriedly. 'Aunt Maria keeps the room so hot I get weak eyes when I go out.'

'Oh, do you?' said Jane a little drily. 'I never knew that

before—You'd better bathe them with green tea, Rachel; it is the finest thing in the world for weak eyes—if, as you say, they are really going bad.'

Rachel said no more. She had that at her heart which forbade her to discuss this strangely irregular weakness of her eyes, as well as forbade her to suspect Edward Formby of evil, even when he was caught walking alone in the wood with pretty Mrs. St. Claire, not two months married. Nor dared she defend him, also because of that something at her heart which made talking of him at all a pain rather than a pleasure.

But from that day another flavour of distaste grew about Ione's name and personality here in Oakhurst. She was known to be a slattern, because she wore a dressing-gown in the morning; she was called Mrs. Pride, because she made the servant button her boots; and Dorothy Doolittle, because she could not manufacture a pudding nor boil a potato; and now she was cried out as a flirt, and no better than she should be, because she had been met walking with Edward Formby of Hillside—he leading his horse, and she as bold as you please—according to Miss Crosby's phrase—in her jaunty little toque and that fine tussore silk walking-costume! And the poor young man, Armine St. Claire, was almost forgiven the slight he had put upon the neighbourhood by finding his wife out of it, for the certain misery that was before him, with such a conglomerate of moral offences as he had married.

## CHAPTER XXVI.

### AFTERNOON TEA.

'We ought to have those young St. Claires to afternoon tea, my dear,' said Mrs. Barrington to her daughter. 'Poor young people, it would be only kind.'

'Yes, mother,' said Monica quietly.

She had broken the neck of her sorrow by now, and had accustomed herself to the fact of Armine's marriage and to the presence of his wife. No thought of self stood between her and her kindly sympathies for Ione. Her love for the only man who had seemed to her to realise her ideal of beauty, poetry, gentleness, and purity lay buried deep in her heart—silent, unacknowledged, unconfessed—a presence not a thought, a perfume not a passion. It was like a disembodied spirit lingering still about the scene of old delights and former life; a shadow that flickered to and fro in the sunshine and stole abroad in the starlight—that hovered over her in her sleep, and passed like a mist from before her eyes when she woke; a shadow that was her daily and hourly companion—but only a shadow, not a living being—only a haunting sense and



not even an active memory. And yet it was active enough to make her wish to be Ione's friend.

Since that first interview with the young bride, and then with Armine himself, something had died within her and something had risen in its stead. It was regret which had died when sorrow would have been sin, and it was resignation which had risen in its place, as a flower springs up from the grave of the dead.

'Yes,' she said, her sweet face undisturbed, and yet what an undertone of infinite sadness there was even in its stillness! 'It will give them pleasure, as you say, mother; and poor Mrs. St. Claire cannot have a very brilliant kind of life here.'

'It was a foolish marriage on both sides,' said Mrs. Barrington, with a sympathetic sigh.

'Not a very wise one, I fear,' said Monica, echoing that sigh. 'But now that it is done and cannot be undone——'

She stopped.

'We must make the best of it,' said her mother, completing the sentence.

'Yes,' she returned.

'Well, write the notes, my dear. Let us have a pleasant little gathering. Ask some nice people. It will do the poor young things good to be asked with the nice people; and I do not suppose they will presume on it afterwards.'

'They are so nice themselves,' said Monica, for one of the rare times of her life pained by her mother's manner.

So sweet as she was by nature, so true a Christian by principle, how strange it was that she should always adopt this tone of superiority, of almost arrogant assumption of patronage, when speaking of Armine St. Claire! After all, were they, the Barringtons, really so very far his superiors? And Ione—she was little like one needing the patronage of superior persons! If mother could only feel for them as kindly as now, but with less condescension!

She said nothing of all this, however, as she began her notes of invitation for the afternoon tea whereof the motive was the St. Claires. She only sighed, and wished that foolish futile wish of the earnest and conscientious, that she could make others see with her eyes—that wish, the folly of which is only equalled by the desire of the loving that all others should recognise the perfectness which love alone can find.

'We will ask Edward, of course, but he is sure not to come,' said Monica, looking up from her desk. 'He has a horror of afternoon teas.'

'We can do no less than invite him,' said Mrs. Barrington; adding, with the mild disapproval of her kind, 'it would be better for him if he liked these pleasant little gatherings more

than he does, dear fellow. He is a dear good boy, but he is not very domestic, I fancy. And I am sorry for it.'

'No,' said Monica.

'I shall be pleased if he comes,' continued her mother. 'One never knows how much good may not be done by little things of this kind. No dropping of good seed is to be despised.'

'No,' said Monica again; and on this very slender chance the note was sent to Hillside with the rest. But, to the surprise of both Monica and her mother, when the afternoon in question came, the first person to arrive was Edward Formby himself; and the next was Ione—without her husband. He had been called out to a distance, she said, making a brave effort not to show the annoyance she felt. For she had not yet learned even the alphabet of resignation to the inevitable conditions of a medical man's life, and could never be got to understand how the claims of his profession should be superior to her own.

'But he will come to take me home,' she added, glad to put herself forward as the cause of his appearance.

On which Mrs. Barrington said kindly, 'I am glad of that, my dear;' and Monica added even yet more kindly, 'We will take good care of you till he does come.'

Was it not Armine's wife to whom she was speaking?

'Thank you,' said Ione, not quite so graciously as might have been.

She did not feel that she wanted taking care of, and secretly resented this slight assault on the fringes of her liberty. That liberty was so precious! It was only another facet of her love—only an interchangeable term for her happiness. With it she had gained Armine, and she watched over it as jealously as one naturally does watch over the ark wherein is enshrined the most sacred possession of one's life.

Poor Ione! Her happiness would not have been quite so secure had she known that Armine's severe case at a distance was merely a pretext to enable him to escape the ordeal of a long afternoon at the Dower House, so that he might compress his agony into as short a space of time as was possible. He too had made heroic efforts to reduce his love to the same ghostly state as that to which Monica's had attained. But he was not so successful as she had been. The ever-present irritation of Ione's love, which never allowed him to forget the mistake he had made, kept his regret more actively alive than the mere blankness of loss would have done. Had he not been married, or had not Ione loved him with such masterful passion, he could have subdued his sorrow more effectually and borne it more stoically. But it was such an incessant sting—such a constant reminder! The efforts made over himself were so unending and full of such maddening

consciousness ; the fight in his heart between love and duty, repentance and regret, distaste and gratitude, was so living, so strong, so terrible. There were times when he felt as if he must tell the whole truth to Ione, if only to free himself from the burning imperiousness of her love—that burning imperiousness which made him think of Monica as the blazing sunshine makes one think of the dark starlight ; of the soft grey days of an English spring ; of the tender tranquillity of the fading autumn ; of anything that shall make one forget for a moment this ardent sun which fires the blood and maddens the brain by its very intensity of splendour. But when he fully realised this kind of weariness, then he turned back to his exacting and adoring wife in contrition and tried to believe that he was indeed grateful for her love, and responsive as became him. As if ever men were grateful for a woman's unasked love ! As if their passion, not voluntarily given, can ever be evoked because of hers !

This afternoon tea, planned with so much kindness by Mrs. Barrington, was outwardly a success. All the nice people who had been invited had come ; and yet, nice people as they might be, no one eclipsed the bride. There was no mistaking Ione's natural position, wife though she was of nothing more aristocratic than a country practitioner. No one, not even Theodosia, could snub her with impunity ; nor could dear Mrs. Barrington herself quite succeed in patronising her with comfort. She held her own with such superb self-possession, such impenetrable pride, that all were foiled and baffled, on the side of impertinence and that of kindness alike.

Theodosia, however, was one of those who, when they wish to attack and have determined to annoy, are no more baffled than so many midges, no more to be foiled than so many mosquitoes. Through all this afternoon she was singularly sweet in manner to every one save Ione, whom as yet she had ignored ; but she was as watchful as she was amiable. She was still unconvinced that Monica's composure was as real as it seemed to be ; and this pronounced kindness to Ione rather confirmed than shook her secret suspicions. Incapable of such generosity herself, she yet knew it when she saw it, and did not confound it with indifference. Also she had heard of Ione's wood-walk with Edward Formby, and she felt as if she were on the threshold of all sorts of potential excitements—as if the curtain had just drawn up and the first act of a well-seasoned drama had been set.

Monica, Ione, and Edward Formby made a pleasant triad, a little withdrawn from the rest. Ione, treated with distinction by both, posed as a young queen, as she used to pose before her father's men at the mill. It was so natural to her to be the young queen ! She did it well because it was so natural. Presently Theo fluttered into the midst of the group, bent on mischief.

Ione had taken as strong an antipathy to Anthony Barrington's sharp-eyed and shrewd-witted wife as Theo in her turn had taken to Ione. Hence there was that kind of secret war between them which women alone know how to wage, and each put herself in mental fighting attitude whenever there was the chance of a fray.

'You are a great walker, Mrs. St. Claire?' said Theo, with an interrogative smile and accent.

Ione raised her eyes in her slow disdainful way. The question seemed innocent enough, but she scented danger all the same.

'I walk,' she said, 'like every one else. A great walker is another thing.'

'Mrs. St. Claire is a great walker, is she not, Mr. Formby?' Theo continued, turning to Edward.

'Is she? Yes, I suppose you would say so,' he answered.

'You must be a good judge,' said Theo innocently.

'I, Mrs. Anthony; why?' he asked.

'You walk with her a great deal, do you not? How delightful to be able to take those long country rambles!'

Ione turned on Anthony Barrington's wife a pair of eyes which blazed with anger.

'Mr. Formby walk a great deal with me?' she repeated. 'Who has put this into your head, Mrs. Barrington? or have you made it up for yourself?'

'I have heard it from twenty people at the least, and I never make things up for myself,' said Theo, with delicious simplicity.

It was Miss Maria Crosby only who had told her.

'And what did you hear?' asked Ione, her eyes still fixed with devouring wrath on the little woman's vivacious face, clothed in its mask of simple candour.

'That you and Mr. Formby walk about together a good deal,' said Theo, as if she had said that the sky was clearing or the tide coming in.

'Oh, come now, that is going too far!' said Edward, with an uneasy kind of laugh.

'I have not heard it, dear Theo,' said Monica gently.

'And is your ignorance to be the measure of my knowledge?' returned Theo sharply.

'Then if you have not made it up yourself, you have heard something so untrue that I do not care to contradict it,' said Ione with disdain.

'No; I thought you would not,' said Theo quite amiably.

'When I came to England, I believed I came among people who spoke the truth,' said Ione.

'I fancy we are a little better in that than yourselves,' returned the other, always amiable and simple.

'You are not so good!' said Ione, with an Italian uplifting of her chin, expressive of supremest contempt.

'Do all Italians get angry about trifles?' asked Theo, with the serious air of one seeking for knowledge.

'I suppose that insignificant and horrid little creatures can make them as cross as others,' answered Ione.

'That would be quite natural,' answered Theo. 'But how different everything must be here for you, Mrs. St. Claire! How much you must have to learn and admire in our English habits and manners!' she continued, suddenly breaking away from the subject immediately on hand and going back to the starting-point.

'As I find them at Oakhurst?' asked Ione. 'I prefer those I have learned at Palermo.'

'Naturally you are fond of Palermo. And it is lovely, is it not?' asked Monica, eager to create a diversion, distressed as she was by this crossing of swords between her brother's wife and Armine's.

'Yes,' answered Ione hardily. 'Of course I love it best of all places in the world—my own old home and all my dear friends—of course! The people are so sweet-tempered and easy to deal with! so good and amiable and well-bred! They never say disagreeable things or try to make one uncomfortable, as you English people do. You are so harsh and rude in comparison with them.'

Which speech, by the way, was scarcely an illustration of Palermitan good-breeding.

'You find your set here unpleasant?—I am so sorry!' said Theo sympathetically.

'My set?' repeated Ione. 'What do you mean, Mrs. Barrington? My set is yours.'

'Do you really think so?' asked Theodosia, with arched eyebrows. 'I should not have thought that. But what a pity you married an ill-tempered Englishman, and not one of those dear good-natured Italians!' she continued, as if she were saying the most kind-hearted and sympathising thing possible. 'It must be dreadful for you, with a cross man, at this wretched little Oakhurst!'

'I do not deserve your pity,' said Ione with fire. 'I married my husband, not Oakhurst. And I did not say that he was unamiable. I said others.'

'But it must be dreadful for you all the same,' said Theo, still sympathetic.

Ione rose to the fly.

'Perhaps you cannot understand that one should love some one better than oneself and everything else,' she said, with an accent which meant to imply Theodosia's utter ignorance of the power of loving. 'We learn to love in Sicily. You English marry only for money, but we for love,' she added emphatically.



Theodosia again arched her well-shaped eyebrows.

'I always thought that, with you, the men married for money only, and the women were sold like slaves,' she said; 'that not a man could be found in all Italy who would marry a girl without a dot; and that you did all your love-making after, not before, and with every man in the world rather than your own husbands.'

'So bad as all that, Theo?' asked Monica, with a laugh that vainly tried to make the whole thing a bad joke.

'What can you, or any of you English people, know of Italy?' sneered Ione. 'You come over for perhaps two months—rush into all the picture-galleries and churches—do Sicily in a week; and then go home and say you know the Italians! You know them as little——'

'As you know the English,' interrupted Theo with a laugh.

'I? I *am* English!' said Ione, lifting her head.

'I don't think we quite acknowledge you!' said Theo. 'If you were English you would not do the things you do, Mrs. St. Claire; or if you did, you would hear of them again from some one.'

'Theo!' said Monica, with forced gaiety, 'what an odd creature you are!'

'People may say of me what they like,' replied Ione; 'I shall do just as I think proper, and I do not care what the whole world thinks!'

'You are quite right, Mrs. St. Claire,' said Edward.

'You will find instead that you are quite wrong,' put in Theo.

Monica laid her hand on the young wife's arm.

'You will never even want to do what others do not, dear Mrs. St. Claire,' she said softly. 'So you are quite right,' as Edward says.

'What a mass of contradiction you are, Monica!' cried Theo.

'You and Mr. Formby are the worst advisers in the world!'

At this moment Armine came into the room, and the sparring between Theodosia and Ione perforce ceased.

St. Claire was deadly pale as he passed through the crowd to where Mrs. Barrington sat on the sofa, facing the door, but his manner was as quiet and apparently as self-possessed, and his bearing was as graceful, as of old. No one could have seen that anything was amiss with him save for that dead-white face, which made his eyes look so large and mournful, and for that artificially composed manner which of itself betrays the fact of effort. After he had spoken to Mrs. Barrington, he made his way towards the group sitting a little apart, seeing in it only Monica by the side of Edward Formby, her naturally assigned husband, and Ione, as the eternal negative set against his own happiness. As he came up, Ione turned her eyes on him with a kind of triumph in them not difficult to read. Here was her vindication—the Apologia for her life—the worthy cause of all that she had done—

the idol for whom she had descended from her own pedestal of pride to carry incense in the service of love. She spoke to him, as he greeted Monica, with that imperious kind of accent which her love and its rights gave her, and made room for him on the sofa beside her. He returned her look with a gentle smile, but took a chair at some distance from her—placing himself between Monica and Theodosia.

Edward Formby's face suddenly changed. He flushed as if a blast from a furnace had blown on him, and, rising abruptly from his place, went across the room to where Anthony loomed large and heavy among his fellow-men, bored and boring. Theodosia looked after him with marked surprise, then said to Armine in her shrill way: 'You have frightened Mr. Formby away, Dr. St. Claire. Have you had a quarrel?'

'With Formby? one of my best friends? Certainly not!' said Armine.

'It is always the best friend,' she said, more shrilly than before.

'With whom one quarrels? I hope not,' he answered, glancing rapidly at Monica.

'How did you find that man?' asked Ione, in an indescribable tone of mingled authority and intimacy.

It was the flourish of her marriage-lines in the face of the world—the assertion of her right of possession.

'Better,' answered Armine curtly.

'What is the matter with him?' she asked, in the same way as before.

'We do not talk shop in public, dear,' was his reply, made very gently as to voice and manner, and accompanied by a smile, yet all the same made as an unmistakable rebuke and repression.

'But if I choose to talk shop?' said Ione, without gentleness or a smile.

Her husband did not seem to hear her.

'How are you getting on with your fretwork, Mrs. Barrington?' he asked Theodosia, giving the knife a cruel turn in his own wound.

'Why do you ask *me*?—I who know so little, and have not learned. Why do you not ask Monica? You taught her, not me,' said Theodosia.

'I cannot claim the honour of having taught Miss Barrington anything,' returned Armine.

'No? I thought you had been her master in a great deal,' said Theo demurely.

'Theo!' said Monica, her face suddenly flushing.

Ione looked from one to the other. There was something here that she did not understand; something of which her sensitive jealousy caught the shadow without discerning the shape. She

did not know what was there before her; she only knew there was something.

'Did you teach Miss Barrington fret-work, Armine?' she asked in her quietest voice, her glittering eyes narrowed to a mere line. 'I did not know that,' she added slowly.

'You did not know what did not exist,' he answered, as gently as he had spoken before.

'When you know my sister better you will understand how to take her,' said Monica. 'Dr. St. Claire's teaching consisted in lending me a few patterns. By-the-by, I have them still,' she added, turning to him and speaking with studied indifference. 'I must look them out and send them back.'

'Do not give yourself any trouble. They are perfectly useless to me,' said Armine.

He would so much rather she kept them. At least they would be a little link, silent and secret as their unhappy love, but always a link!

'Why do you deny it?' asked Theodosia, looking from Dr. St. Claire to Monica and back again. 'What is there to deny or be ashamed of? How funny you two people are!'

'You shall teach me, Armine,' said Ione imperiously.

'It is such a pretty amusement!' said Monica.

'Have you time to learn, dear?' asked St. Claire of his wife, that pale smile again about his lips, and his manner almost ostentatiously gentle.

'If I say I have, I have,' was her reply.

She had never spoken like this to him before. Since her marriage she had been so happy, so content with fate and life, that she had dropped all the angularities of her former self and had become as soft as a silken ball. But to-day, irritated by Theodosia's insolence, and now excited by her insinuations, she was no longer the Ione of these later halcyon times, but the Ione of Palermo, the moral Ishmaelite whose hand was against every one—even against the man she loved.

'If you are going to learn, I will lend you my first patterns,' said Monica, very kindly.

'If my husband will not teach me, no one else shall,' said Ione unpleasantly.

'Of course he will,' said Monica; and Armine added, with a little too much eagerness: 'Of course, if you wish it, Ione. I shall only be too happy.'

Ione's face, which had become proud and set, neither softened nor brightened. What business had this Miss Barrington to answer for her husband? If she herself could not answer for him, no one else should.

It was but a slight matter on which to found displeasure, but it was quite enough to make Ione sullen and silent during the

walk home; and Armine, glad of her silence because of the respite it gave him from her love, did not seek to break it. Thus the two paced along the highway a little apart, though in line, looking as if they had quarrelled; and Ione feeling as she looked.

All through the evening Ione was cross and moody, suffering as she used to suffer at Palermo when the heavens seemed shut against her and no pitying God lived to listen to her prayer. It was the first day since her marriage that she had felt this frightful spiritual loneliness which had been her torture in the past, and, with the superstition of her kind, she connected this rift in her well-tuned lute with the Barringtons, and credited them with future disaster.

'I shall be made unhappy by them,' she said to herself, and hated them all, as she thus thought—even that soft-voiced, gentle-faced Monica, who yet seemed so sincerely desirous to be kind to her. 'But I do not want her to be kind to me. I want only Armine's love, and my rights. And his love is my right,' she added, almost aloud.

She looked at her husband sitting at the table reading. Suddenly she got up from her place and went over to him.

'My darling!' she said, putting her hands round his throat and bending back his head while she kissed his face, feverishly, as one kisses something thought to have been lost and now found—as one answers the love despaired of and now granted.

'Dear Ione!' he said gently, smoothing her hair and returning her kiss as if he had given a flower for a flame. 'But you must let me read now, my dear. I have my cases to study.'

His finger was between the pages, and he opened the book as he spoke.

'You are always occupied when I want you!' she replied petulantly. 'You are out all day, and in the evening, when you ought to belong to me, you say you have to read up for your horrid cases. It is too bad, Armine! I did not marry you to be treated like this!'

He sighed, and laid his book open face downward on the table.

'But if I do not study, dear love, I cannot practise. I shall never get on,' he said gently as before.

'You can read in the morning,' she returned sullenly.

'When I am seeing patients?'

'The evening is mine. You should not neglect me as you do,' she said.

'Neglect you, dear? I do not neglect you, Ione!'

He spoke tenderly, and with that remonstrance against supposed coldness which means more than assertion.

'Yes,' she said, 'you do. You no longer love me, Armine!—you no longer care for me—I who have loved you so much!'

She spoke at random, not believing her own words, but the mere thought was too much for her. Were it true it would be her death-warrant.

Overcome by the passion of her fancy, she flung herself at his feet, and, laying her head on his knees, as she crouched like some imploring suppliant before him, she burst into a flood of tears. For the moment she had no rights; she had only sorrows.

‘If you do not love me, Armine, I shall die!’ she sobbed.

He put his arms round her, his face deadly white, his lips drawn and quivering.

‘Foolish child!’ he said; ‘you know that I love you. Why do you make yourself and me unhappy for a mere fancy?’

‘Say it again, Armine! say it again!’ she said, lifting up her face, tear-stained and disordered, but as divine as the Medusa’s in her agony, as full of love as Semele’s in the moment of her prayer. ‘I am so wretched—so heart-broken—tell me that you love me, darling—again! again!’

‘You know that I love you!’ he repeated in a steady voice; and Ione, seizing his hands, kissed them till they burnt like fire under her lips.

‘My life! my love!’ she said, her glorious eyes shining through their tears with that light which once before had almost blinded him. ‘Your love is all my life—all I care for in this world or the next! Without it I should die! Must I die, Armine?’ she added in a caressing tone, her voice modulated to the sweetest music as she raised one hand and bent his face down to hers.

‘No; live, poor child!’ he answered, laying his hand over her eyes to shut them from his sight; saying to himself: ‘Would to God that I did not!’

## CHAPTER XXVII.

### HER HUSBAND’S FRIEND.

BACHELOR’S parties are notoriously charming, and Edward Formby’s were the most charming of their kind. It was always an earnest of pleasant hours set in a golden circlet of generous hospitality when those clumsily written, rudely folded notes were sent out, and a luncheon or a dinner at Hillside was offered to the neighbourhood. The men felt freer there than at places where there was a lady to keep the reins tight, sniffing disdainfully at cigar ash, and measuring the after-dinner magnums as vices to be deprecated even when perforce allowed. And the women amused themselves by examining everything within their range, and noting the difference between their host’s management and their



own. And as mixed with this curiosity was always a dash of pity for the poor young man's loneliness and certain discomfort—his bad treatment by his servants, who of course got their will of him in all directions, and plucked him bare to feather their own nests well—they enjoyed themselves immensely; personally profiting by his un-wived condition, while saying how much better everything would be were there but a lady like one of themselves at the head of affairs.

Hence when, two days after the meeting of forces at the Dower House, notes of invitation to a luncheon party at Hillside fell on about twenty of what Mrs. Barrington called the nice people, those who accepted at all accepted with alacrity, feeling sure that the fates were preparing for them a day which, if it did not count as so much solid substance in their life's happiness, would at least take rank as a very well-flavoured social sweetmeat.

Mrs. Barrington had invited the nice people to meet the St. Claires at afternoon tea:—Edward Formby threw beyond her cast into the enlarged domain of luncheon. It was a repetition of the time when he had made the handsome young doctor, newly settled in the place, one with the male aristoi round about. But what he had done then with good-will he did now with enthusiasm of a rather more intense kind than he acknowledged to himself. Spurred on by this enthusiasm for the sacred rights of women, as represented by Ione, and the holy cause of social equality, as embodied in Ione's husband, he made the young bride the chief lady of the occasion, and took her into luncheon before even the Dowager Lady Hinton, who was naturally the queen regnant of the district. It was a rash thing to do; but Edward was not one to measure the width of the leap when he had made up his mind to take it. And he had made up his mind to treat Mrs. St. Claire, the portionless bride of the local practitioner, as if she had been a direct descendant from the Plantagenets and the owner of half the manors in the place. He did not reflect that he might do her more harm than good by his chivalry. He only thought how best to emphasise his admiration for the pretty woman who had come among them like a being from another sphere, and how to hold her with most determination shoulder-high above every one else.

The Honourable Mrs. Tanner and the Dowager Lady Hinton whispered together; and they and all the other well-born matrons exchanged looks which were more eloquent than words. They were deeply affronted; even though Edward Formby was such a dear boy, and Hillside would be such a charming home for Julia or Mabel, Maud or Mary—Monica Barrington showing no haste to make it her own. But Ione, the cause of their displeasure, was no whit moved. She took this attention, as she took all

others paid her, as hers by right; just as Armine had done in his bachelor days when he lived with the first set and was ranked with the second. It made the other ladies even more angry with her than with Edward, to see her walk in on his arm as proudly in one way and as unconcernedly in another as if she had been one of themselves. When great people patronise little ones, the least they expect is the gratitude of humility in return. And this new girl, this country doctor's wife, was evidently neither grateful nor humble.

In pairing off his guests, Edward, without thought or knowledge of any kind, gave Monica to Armine, as he would have given his sister to Ione's husband, for better emphasis and declaration.

What need have we of ghosts to glide about the battlements and haunt the dim chambers of the castle? We carry our own with us, and have no room for others. The ghosts of murdered love, of withered joys, of strangled hopes, of dead beliefs—we have them incorporate with the very substance of our life. They lie in our bosom and pulsate in our heart; their sighs are in our breath, their tears are in our blood; and when we smile, they whisper to us softly, like the cadence of a funeral hymn beating up the valley against the joy-bells. No day dawns without their pale faces meeting ours as we look towards the sun, and the night never comes when we can lay them down to rest before us. The shadows of the past lie over the present and its ghosts live with us, so that we sometimes do not know which is true and which is fancy—that burning life of the long ago, or this pallid death of to-day.

Those two young people sitting there, apparently living and solid as the rest, were in reality as shadowy, one to the other, as the souls of the dead meeting mournfully in Hades. Between them lay that terrible gulf which nothing now could bridge over. They must not even look at each other across it. They must not consciously remember that it existed at all. It were a sin even to recognise it. Does a woman ever consciously remember that such a gulf exists between herself and a beloved brother? As little then must they—these two who had loved—and who now must ignore and forget.

Strong in her purity and patience, Monica could bear with a sad kind of equanimity this ordeal born of the new order of things. She looked at Ione, measured her beauty and that strange charm which stung while it attracted, and felt herself distant beyond the reach of jealousy. It was to have been expected. She was too beautiful to resist.

On his side, Armine looked from Ione to Monica, thinking how far superior the pearly purity of this latter was to his young wife's golden glory. For a painter's model, Ione—for the charm of life and the holiness of thought, then Monica!

Opposite to them sat Theodosia, her herd of invisible thoughts always trotting restlessly through her small head. But save the excessive pallor of Armine, and the rather more than natural quietness of Monica, she saw nothing that could enlighten her; and the luncheon passed decorously, as luncheons generally do. Only once, when Monica said, 'How very lovely Mrs. St. Claire looks to day!' Armine's pale face changed colour, and something, which the little woman watching so sharply could not read, came into his eyes. He was too loyal to disclaim the praise which was Ione's due. But he longed to be able to say, 'Her beauty is my bane—her love is my torture!'

As he could not say this, he merely answered as any other husband would: 'You are very kind to say so. I think she is looking well to-day.'

And this trivial reply was the most painful thing of the whole of this bitter-sweet time, so full of pain and pleasure as it was.

Conversation between these two, so closely united and so widely separated, was difficult and hedged round with thorns and briars. When Monica asked about Italy, each remembered the reason for Armine's going, which made the past a kind of challenge flung in the face of the present. When she spoke of Ione, she saw what it cost him to reply. She could not talk of herself, for she had no facts to tell him and her feelings she must conceal; nor could she question him of himself for the same reason. Hence their talk was spasmodic and unsatisfactory, and as subdued as the whispers of those who walk among graves, fearful lest too loud a voice should waken the dead. They were like two thirsty deer, lapping at the stones of a dried watercourse where the living fount was guarded by lions. Yet Monica believed that of course Armine no longer loved her, having married Ione; and Armine believed that of course Monica no longer respected him, seeing how false he had been both to himself and to her. And yet, each felt that it would not be well to go too deep into analysis.

At the head of the broad table, where Ione sat by Edward Fomby, conversation was far brisker than it was here between these two, who had so much to tell and so little to say. He asked her all sorts of questions about herself, and was as much interested in her habits as if he had it at heart to harmonize them with his own. He was really quite pained when she told him that she had never been on horseback in her life, at least not as English people count being on horseback: that she could not play lawn-tennis; knew nothing of the laws of cricket; could not tell a foxhound from a harrier, though she did understand a Maltese from a pug; but he brightened up considerably when she said that she could swim, and that she regretted her ignorance of those other accomplishments, and wished she could redeem the lost time.

'I will lend you a horse,' he then said, with a joyous look and blithe intonation. 'I have the jolliest little mare that will carry you like a bird. Every Englishwoman ought to know how to ride, and you will soon have a perfect seat. You are just the kind for it.'

'Thank you,' said Ione, with a rapid glance at Theodosia.

Edward followed her eyes. He laughed aloud.

'You are not to be frightened by a little gossip?' he said in an under-voice. 'If you are, you may live all your life in fear at Oakhurst.'

'I am afraid of nothing,' said Ione, throwing up her head and making the Italian sound of disdain.

'So I should have thought,' he said with admiration.

She looked at him with a slight smile.

'Except of brigands in a lonely wood,' she said prettily.

'By George, yes! that is quite allowable!' he cried, laughing. 'Then when will you come for your first ride?' he asked. 'No time like the present for fixing things.'

Something crossed Ione's mood. A sudden blush of pleasure mingled with doubt flashed over her face, but did not linger there, and she looked at her husband as if seeking for direction. He was looking at Monica, and the magnetic power of those glorious eyes failed to attract his attention. Angry that he did not return her look, Ione said abruptly to her host; 'You are quite right, Mr. Formby. Come to-morrow. If I am to learn at all I might as well begin to-morrow.'

She spoke rather loudly, her voice vibrating like metal rods, as it did when she was displeased.

'Quite too utterly delighted,' laughed Edward, charmed by her ready acquiescence and meaning no evil in the arrangement—sower of wild oats though he was, with a few handfuls still left in the sack. Those healthy, headstrong, non-introspective people never mean evil. They do it all the same; but they rush into it without foresight, as one running swiftly down a mountain side rushes over the precipice, unable to pull up in time and not knowing where he is going.

'But how about the habit?' then said Edward. 'If you have not been accustomed to ride you have no hat or habit!'

His handsome, ruddy face, which was so like a faun's, looked as pained as if he had encountered a real sorrow. A proper hat and well-fitting habit were as much among the things which were *de rigueur* with ladies as gloves in a ball-room.

'Cannot I make a shawl do duty for a skirt?' asked Ione, with recollections of the mules at Segestæ.

'Oh no, that is impossible!' he answered, really shocked by the suggestion. 'We must do better than that. I'll tell you what we can do. Monica Barrington will lend you hers till you

get your own made. It may not be quite a fit, but it will do at a pinch.'

'I do not like borrowing,' said Ione proudly.

'Just this once. It does not signify borrowing from Monica. She is such a capital girl! And no one need mind what she does for them. Besides it is not like anything else. Hats and habits are not necessities where there have been no horses.'

'No,' said Ione sagely.

'Then I have settled all that first-rate!' cried Edward, as joyously as if he had found a prize. 'We will speak to Monica and get the thing arranged.'

So it was all set square between them; and Ione consented to borrow Monica's hat and habit, difference of fit notwithstanding, and to take her first ride to-morrow on Edward Formby's dainty, clever, and sure-footed little mare which was just made to carry her. But if Armine had looked at her when she had looked at him, perhaps she would have put the subject by and have refused her consent to the whole thing.

When they went back into the drawing-room, Ione, beckoning to her husband, strolled away into the conservatory into which the room opened. She must have a moment alone with him! Under the cover of the ferns and flowers she must make him feel the vitality of her passion and return the loving caress of her eyes! She should die else! she should suffocate! Dear Armine!—sweet, precious, darling Armine—how she loved him!

A bird was singing loudly in a cage hung up among the passion-flowers which covered the supporting pillars. It was a canary, of the same kind as that which Ione had killed at Palermo.

'How like poor Mimi!' she said, stopping before the cage. 'Poor pretty faithless little Mimi!'

Armine was not specially delighted by the reminiscence.

'Yes,' he said gravely. 'Poor little Mimi!'

'Inconstant little wretch!' said Ione with sudden bitterness. 'He deserved it!'

'Do you think so?' said Armine, still grave, and speaking a little wearily.

Edward Formby came up to them at that moment. They were standing by the cage, Armine looking at the bird, Ione looking at Armine.

'Are you admiring my bird?' he said, in his hearty unconscious way. 'Is he not a stunning little chap? He can do all sorts of things; sham dead, hop lame, and obey the word of command like a trick horse or a trained dog. He is the jolliest little brute! Here, Jack, Jack! come out, my boy, and show yourself,' he added, opening the door of the cage and putting in his hand, on which the bird hopped, chirping and fluttering his wings, pleased to be taken notice of by his master.



After he had been put through his paces, as Edward called it, Ione held out her hand.

'I wonder if he will come to me?' she said, speaking to the bird in its own language. It looked at her curiously, chirped to its master, then flew on to her hand, and fluttered its wings as it had done before.

Edward laughed and looked greatly pleased.

'He is not generally so sociable,' he said. 'I never saw him do that before. Jolly little beast! He knows his friends, you see!'

'I should not like him to go to anyone else if he were mine,' said Ione.

'No? why not?' answered Edward with surprise. 'I am very glad that he likes you. It shows his good taste.'

'Mr. Formby is more amiable than I am, is he not, Armine?' Ione said hardily, laying her disengaged hand on her husband's shoulder.

'Is he?' returned Armine.

He knew quite well what she meant; but he was in an unamiable mood at this moment. It was seldom that he felt so peevish as he did now. If only he could check Ione's excessive love—repress her demonstrations—he should hold it for such unspeakable relief! If only she would forget him for a moment and let him forget her!

'You know what I mean, do you not?' returned Ione; 'sharing the affections of his bird. Mr. Formby is more amiable in this than I am, is he not?'

Still caressing the bird, she looked at her husband from under her level brows, with that look which was at once a challenge and a menace.

'I suppose I must confess that he is,' answered Armine, with a smile as unsympathetic as his gravity had been.

'I would do it again,' said Ione hastily. 'I would do it to anything that left me for anyone else. Anything—anyone,' she repeated with emphasis, no longer kept in bounds by Edward's presence, seeing that he had been taken off by Lady Hinton, who had come on the scene to see what was going on and to assert her own claims to consideration.

'Would you?' said Armine, half carelessly, half kindly. 'I scarcely think you are so bad as you wish to appear, Ione. I do not believe you would.'

Extremes meet. Love, as imperious as Ione's, is satisfied with as little as that which suffices for the craven and humble. It is so vigorous, so large, so self-sustaining, so magnifying, that it nourishes itself on the smallest amount of food from without—just as the craven asks only the mere permission to exist. She caught the implied praise in her husband's words; and as the grey

mountain peak is turned to ruddy bronze by the first ray of sunrise, so did Armine's words transform her whole being. The angry passions which had begun to dominate her were loosened; the very outlines of her face were softened; the burning light in her eyes was quenched; her heart was filled with joy; her whole soul felt satisfied, soothed, released.

'Then you do not think I am bad all through, Armine?' she said tenderly, looking into his face with eyes which caressed him as her lips would have done had not old Lady Hinton been peering at them through the ferns.

'Not bad at all, dear,' he answered softly.

But he did not return her eloquent look. He was watching a fly that had become caught in a diunea.

'At least I am not bad to you, my own darling, my beloved!' she said, her voice lowered to a whisper as she bent towards him with a movement full of indescribable tenderness and grace, and laid her hand caressingly on his.

Armine's pale face blushed, but not with pleasure. Lady Hinton, watching them through the ferns, smiled sarcastically, and said in an audible whisper to Edward Formby: 'What an extraordinary young woman!' while Edward's bronzed cheeks grew pale, and his hands shook as if with fever; and then, others of the guests sauntering in, they all went on through the greenhouse into the garden, and so to the hothouse which made part of the attraction at Hillside.

Suddenly Ione gave a little cry. It expressed that kind of emotion born of surprise which is as much pain as pleasure.

'We have this all over our house at home—at Palermo!' she said, pointing to a bougainvillea, which the Hillside cultivator had reared with trouble and regarded with pride. 'And this!' of a datura; 'and these again!' bending over an Arabian jasmine side by side with a tuberose.

When she lifted up her face tears were in her eyes. She was astonished at herself. A week ago she would not have believed that anything reminding her of Palermo could have brought tears to her eyes. But to-day she felt strangely moved; she did not know why. It was almost as if she were unhappy. Yet how could she be unhappy? Her husband was absolutely perfect; nevertheless she was dissatisfied and uneasy.

And all for nothing! She knew that he loved her just as much as she loved him; and that was more than life itself. But he was not so demonstrative as she was; and before people he was decidedly cold. She must accustom herself to this, unpleasant as it was. It was English; and she loved England. Still, these two experiences of society at Oakhurst had not added to her happiness, if they had gratified her pride. She was happier at home with Armine's dear head on her lap, when she could show him her love

in all its fervour and receive as much as she gave. She bated these restraints! Her whole life had been one of restraint. Now, when she had the liberty of expansion, she regretted to lose it even for a few hours.

Which did not quite explain the reason why her beautiful eyes were dark and humid because she saw a few pots full of flowers which reminded her of Palermo, where she had been so wretched, and whence flight had secured her joy.

While they were still in the hothouse, a servant came with a message to St. Claire. He had been sent for to the mines, a good seven miles away, to an accident which brooked of no delay. The mines led away from Oakhurst still farther into the country than Hillside, so that he could not take Ione back with him on the way; and he must set off at once.

'But how am I to get home?' asked Ione hastily.

She was always offended when the claims of her husband's profession clashed with her own, and could never be brought to understand that her rights were second to those of the sick.

'I am sorry, but I must go at once—I cannot help you,' said Armine.

'What a pity I did not have the carriage!' said Monica. 'We came in the victoria, Theo and I. Anthony is riding. I wish I could give you a seat, Mrs. St. Claire, but Theo's victoria has no third place.'

'Thank you, I do not wish a place in Mrs. Barrington's carriage,' said Ione ungraciously.

'Don't make yourself uneasy,' said Edward. 'I will see to all that. Mrs. St. Claire will be quite safe in my hands,' he added, turning to Armine; 'I will take good care of her and land her safe. So don't worry, my good fellow. It will be all right.'

'It is not very pleasant to be left here like a parcel to be delivered at my own home,' said Ione, with a smile too bitter for playfulness.

'I cannot help myself,' said Armine. 'I must go now at once. Thank you, Formby, you are very good. I put my wife in your hands, and I am sure you will take care of her. Good-morning. Good-bye, Ione. Good-bye, Miss Barrington.'

He held out his hand to Monica, and to her only, and he looked at her the last of all to whom he bade adieu. Then, with an effort, as if he remembered himself in time, he turned to Ione and forced himself to smile; and so passed away, carrying his young wife's sunshine with him—that sunshine which cast over him so deep a shadow.

When the party broke up in due course, Ione was naturally left the last of the guests. Edward, however, had had his dogcart brought round with the rest, and he and Ione were seated therein,

side by side, before old Lady Hinton and the other matrons of pride and place had left the grounds. Still, there was a look of intimacy and assignment about the whole thing which the dowagers noted with as much displeasure as they had noted the fact of Ione's supremacy at luncheon. Patronage was one thing, equality another. The one might pass; the other was inadmissible; and Edward Formby had to receive a lesson which each one concerned made up her mind she would be the first to give him.

This sudden diversion of thought and plan made both Edward and Ione forget all about that hat and habit which she was to have borrowed from Monica Barrington for the sake of those riding-lessons which he was to give her so generously. He remembered it as he was driving her home, and proposed to go round by the Dower House to make the demand. But Ione peremptorily refused to do this, and said: No; she would wait now until she had a hat and habit of her own. It was not in her way to borrow, and she would not, even of this extremely popular and good-natured Miss Monica Barrington—said with a sarcastic inflection of her voice which rather startled unsuspecting Edward Formby.

'You do not know what to order,' he answered. 'If you will not ask Monica, you must let me speak to Wilson. He is a capital habit-maker when directed; but he must be kept up to the mark. I know what you want, and you do not.'

'Thank you; yes; do speak to him,' said Ione, forgetting the shallow water in which the domestic bark floated, if indeed it could be called floating at all. 'If I am to have it, I might as well have it perfect; and, as you say, I do not know the mysteries and should not understand what to order.'

So there the matter stood. Those riding lessons were to be taken; the clever mare was to be put in requisition; and Ione's hat and habit were to be ordered under the direction of Edward Formby of Hillside. He knew what would suit her and what she ought to have. And he was her husband's sincere friend. Yes, quite true; he was this and more. Nevertheless, friend to Armine as he was, he felt that Ione was far too good both for her husband and her present position—that a man of St. Claire's weak health and slender income was not worthy of her; that her social standing was infinitely below her personal deserts; and that she ought to have married some strong, healthy, well-endowed country gentleman, with a stake in the county and a family-tree of deep roots and well-seasoned branches—a man who would have carried her on the crest of the wave and given her a home such as she deserved—like Hillside, for instance.

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

## THE FIRST STRUGGLE.

‘ARMINE, I am going to take riding-lessons,’ said Ione in a somewhat more cold and queenly than her usual loving manner.

A slight change had come over her of late, damping down the extreme fervour of her love, as that filmy mist, the offspring of heat and precursor of storm, veils the glare of a cloudless sky. There was no positive cloud in the sky of her love, but there was undoubtedly a dim and misty kind of obscuration which neither she nor her husband confessed. Whether confessed or not, it was there;—torture to her if to him—and herein lay the sorrow of the whole thing—both restful and refreshing, like silence after turmoil and freedom after oppression.

‘I should be very glad if you could,’ was his reply to her announcement.

‘I did not say if I could; I said I am going to,’ returned Ione.

‘Yes? But from whom? How is it to be managed?’ he asked, looking at her in some surprise.

‘Your friend, Mr. Formby, will lend me a horse,’ she said.

‘And after? When the horse is lent, who is to teach you, and who will ride with you? You see I have so little leisure!’ said Armine, with the denseness of a man whose imagination is not quickened by the jealous fears of love.

‘Mr. Formby will both teach me and ride with me,’ said Ione, as if she had said something commonplace and nothing startling.

‘Edward Formby!’

‘And why not, pray?’

The young husband of the beautiful bride looked grave.

‘Surely you are not going to be silly, Armine!’ said Ione, with unmistakable irritation. ‘You never take me with you. I am left to myself all day long—all day long. You cannot object to my amusing myself in the best way I can. And I shall not mind if you do,’ she added unpleasantly.

‘I do not object to your amusing yourself, Ione. I often think, indeed, how dull and lonely your life must be, my poor child,’ answered Armine kindly. ‘But, you see, there are one or two things to be thought of in this besides the mere pleasure.’

‘Indeed? What are they?’ she asked with indifference.

‘Well, you see, you are very young and very beautiful, Ione’—the set proud face did not relax by a line; a week ago it would have brightened into more than ordinary radiance with pleasure at the compliment—‘and Edward Formby is a young unmarried man,



and not some steady old stager who would be like your father. And English people are strict ; and I really do not think it would quite do.'

'Part of that objection is an insult, and the other part foolish,' said Ione.

'It is impossible to defy public opinion,' cried Armine.

'I intend to try,' she said. 'In Italy a married woman is free to do what she likes—I am not going to be less free in England!'

'You will ruin yourself and me,' Armine returned, less reproachfully than sorrowfully.

'If you are silly enough to be ruined for such a trifle, I cannot help it,' said Ione. 'But I mean to have my rights.'

'Do you count among those rights that of keeping a riding-horse?—you, the wife of a poor professional man, in a small country place like Oakhurst?' asked Armine.

'The horse will cost you nothing,' she answered. 'It will only be the riding-habit ; and this is not expensive.'

'No? I always thought that riding-habits were expensive,' said her husband briskly, glad of the extra leverage which she herself had suggested. 'In fact I know they are ; and, dear Ione, I fear I cannot afford the outlay. You may be sure it grieves me to say this, but I cannot.'

'It seems to me you never can afford anything for me,' said Ione bitterly. 'You contrive to get all you want for yourself. It is only when I want anything that you are suddenly so desperately poor!'

'Is that quite fair?' he asked.

'Fair or not, it is true,' she said.

'I think not, Ione, Poor as I am, I think I share equally with you all that can be afforded.'

'And I do not,' said Ione.

'I told you beforehand that, as my wife, you would be subject to all manner of privations,' said Armine, with a touching little accent of regret—almost of apology. 'I have always dreaded the moment when you would realise the bitter truth, and when it would press on you heavily, as it does now.'

'I do not mind it in great things,' she returned. 'I did not expect to keep a carriage and men-servants, because you told me I should not ; but I did not expect you would grudge me every little thing as you do.'

'I grudge you nothing, Ione, that I can afford,' he interposed warmly.

'And you might certainly let me profit by the kindness of others, without making this absurd and perfectly useless fuss,' continued Ione. 'You neglect me so much yourself, it is not right to object to anyone else being kind to me.'

'I neglect you no more than my business obliges me to do ;

and I am delighted when others are kind to you. You know that as well as I do. But in this matter—the expense is beyond my means for the first part, and I am honestly afraid of what the world will say for the second.’

‘I have told you already—I do not believe the one, and the other is an insult,’ said Ione.

‘Believe it or not as you will,’ he said firmly, ‘it is true. I cannot afford it; and I will not run into debt.’

‘But, Dio mio! I must have clothes!’ cried Ione scornfully. ‘Am I never to have a new dress, Armine?’

‘I suppose you must when wanted,’ he said. ‘But there is dress and dress; and riding-habits cost more than gowns.’

‘Certainly they do not!’ was the reply, made very positively. ‘That is nonsense. How can they, when they take so little stuff and have no trimming? And then they last so long and save the others. In fact a riding-habit is economy. If you think for yourself you will see it must be so,’ she said, in that triumphant *q. e. d.* manner of those who are convinced with their will.

‘Dear Ione, you know that it goes to my heart to deny you anything—to thwart you in any way,’ said Armine gently. He was really sorry for her, and he spoke the truth when he said that it pained him to deny her or to thwart her. Not able to love her as she loved him, he did honestly try to make up for his comparative deadness by complaisance and indulgence. ‘But what can I do?’ he added. ‘I will not get into debt, even for you, dear’—smiling a little sadly—‘and my income is so miserably small!’

‘And what am I to do?’ retorted Ione. ‘I cannot tell Mr. Formby that I am too poor to afford myself such a trifle as a hat and habit! It would be too humiliating—too disgracefully mean and shabby!’

‘Ah, child!’ he said sorrowfully; ‘you are beginning now to feel the pinch!’

‘You are making the pinch, as you call it, yourself,’ she answered, lifting her chin disdainfully.

‘Poor girl!’ he said gently.

‘I do not want your pity!’ said Ione, with a gesture as if she flung off something distasteful.

It was strange how her imperiousness kept pace with his greater mildness. Loving him as she did, it might have been thought that his will would have been her pleasure, and that she would have responded to the faintest show of tenderness in him as an Æolian harp responds to the lowest sighings of the wind. And yet, the thing, when fairly considered, was explicable enough. It was not his love for her that had won her—it was her passion for him that had possessed her from the beginning until now. She had loved him of her own free-will, not because of his prayer; she

had given, not yielded; and now when she was secretly sore because of his secret coldness, and openly irritated by his avowed opposition, she was not to be mollified by mere gentleness of manner. Gentleness is not tenderness; and love recognises the difference.

'I am sorry you take me in this spirit,' said Armine, always grave and quiet, but with, for him, unwonted firmness. 'Believe me, I am grieved to oppose your wish—to deny you any pleasure possible in this dull place.'

'Your being grieved does me no good,' replied Ione contemptuously. 'You do not remember the disgraceful position you put me in with Mr. Formby. You neither remember nor care.'

'I will manage that,' said Armine. 'I have no shame in confessing that I am poor. Debt is the disgrace to my mind, not self-denial: and to get what one cannot pay for, and cannot honestly afford, is surely less noble than to say frankly one has not enough money for such and such an outlay.'

'It is all very well for you to be so philosophical about it,' retorted Ione. 'You have everything you want or have ever been accustomed to. It is only I who have to suffer; and after such a different life as I led at Palermo it is hard on me! But what do you care? Nothing! So long as you enjoy yourself, and have your own way, you do not give me a thought!'

'You are unjust!' said Armine, suddenly roused and strangely moved. 'When you have come back to your better self, you will be the first to acknowledge the wrong that you have done me.'

He got up as he said this, and went out of the room, leaving Ione more resolute than before, and with the same kind of Ishmaelitic feeling that she used to have at Palermo when denied what she desired and held it her right to have.

In this first serious contest between them she was determined to win the day. She had taken to heart that fatal resolve, cherished by so many young wives, not to give way. It was due to herself, to her present dignity and future independence, to maintain her ground and force her husband to abandon his. The supremacy of woman was one of the assured facts of life to her; and the best beloved man among them all was, when it came to practice, only a superior kind of hewer of wood and drawer of water for his wife's benefit. Even when figured like an Apollo—as, for instance, this beloved and adored Armine—even then he was no better than a petted slave to be coerced when he resisted, rewarded with kisses for wages when he yielded, and commanded always as a private is commanded by his captain—questioning or disobedience ranking as a sin. If she gave way now, she thought, she would have to be subordinate for ever. If she conquered

now, the reins would be in her hand, not his; and her power would be consolidated. No, she would not yield; and he must. He must understand that she had married him because she loved him, not because he had wanted her; married him of her own free will, not because of his insistence; married to ensure her freedom, not to pass under another kind of bondage, even though that were the sweet bondage of womanly love. No: she must not and would not give way. That hat and habit represented her rights, the charter of her liberties. She would take them as her colours and conquer all along the line.

While she was thinking this, sitting with her hands crossed in her lap, her eyes, with that fatal lurid light in them as in the old disturbed days, fixed on the threadbare carpet, she heard the street-door shut, and knew that her husband had left the house. Had he returned to the room and spoken to her, however pleasantly, she would have repelled him. But she was angry all the same that he had left without coming to sue for peace and be dismissed with war. Arbitrary and jealous, proud and exacting, passionate, unyielding, she was a difficult creature to manage when her temper was roused. No reasoning had any effect on her; and kindness but hardened her still more. The only thing to do with her was to leave her to fight her own wild beasts undisturbed, and to work through her moods unhelped and unhindered. It was the safer way; and at least somewhat confined the area.

While she was still sitting there, eating out her heart because Armine had not come to wish her good-bye, and submit to those vials of wrath which she would have broken over his head, a ring came to the door-bell, and Edward Formby was ushered into the room—the innocent Mephistopheles of this sullen and self-tormented Gretchen. When he left, after about an hour's stay, the whole thing was arranged, and Ione had agreed to do that which her husband had forbidden, and to undertake what he had disallowed—Edward Formby not having a suspicion of the true state of the case. Like many rich people, he could not understand small pecuniary impossibilities. That the St. Claires should not be able to give a thousand pounds for a picture, or five hundred for a yacht—that was within reason and the range of his comprehension; but that a thing of the first necessity, like a riding-habit, should be beyond their lawful range of expenditure—that was simply incredible. Not for a moment did it occur to him that this had been a bone of contention between these two young people, or that Armine had forbidden Ione what seemed to the master of Hillside as much a matter of course as bread or meat, or shoes or gloves.

Had she confided in him, he would have thought St. Claire both mean and tyrannical, and he would have offered to reason

with him and to manage him for her benefit. And had she then, as she would have done, passionately refused his advocacy, or declared that she would not accept anyone's influence if her own had failed, he would have laughed, as his prototype the faun would have laughed in the woods, had a dryad refused his offering of milk and honey because she did not like the carved pattern of the beech-wood bowl in which it was presented. To Edward the main thing in life was to do as you liked and get what you wanted, if you could without too great a strain on that elastic band called conscience; and to forego a good for silly pride was an imbecility of which he could not conceive any sane person guilty. And Ione was sane, and not imbecile. Hence he saw nothing and suspected nothing; and the arrangements were made and completed without his touching the very outer edge of the truth, that all this was without Armine's knowledge and against his direct prohibition. And when he left, he left Ione dangerously radiant and disastrously triumphant, and a worse woman than she was when he found her.

She was all this in still greater measure when the habit came home, fitting her like a dark-green skin, and making her figure the most perfect thing of the kind to be found within the four seas; while the masculine hat set on the top of her golden curls became her as no hat nor bonnet had ever done before. She was superb, supreme, divine in her beauty; and as she stood before the glass and looked at herself in her new attire, as she might have looked at a stranger, she could not repress an exclamation of joy at the perfection of her beauty, the absolute grace and symmetry of her form. Really, with such a result it would have been a sin not to have had a habit and a hat!

Armine was sitting in his own room, writing down symptoms and treatment of a difficult case, when Edward Formby, followed by his groom leading a lady's horse, halted at the door. At the same moment Ione came downstairs in the dress which had been the cause of their first serious contention, and of which he had heard nothing since the day of dispute. And as that filmy little mist, already spoken of, had gone on steadily increasing and deepening, with always the same quiet and voiceless coolness—so refreshing to him, such torture to her—he had not stirred the still waters, but had let them, and the sleeping dog about his feet, lie unmolested.

'Good-bye, Armine. I am going to ride with Mr. Formby,' said Ione, standing suddenly before him, pale with excitement, conscious of her beauty, proud of herself, her diplomacy, her resolution, and rejoicing in her victory. 'Do I not look well?' she added hardily. 'Is not my habit beautiful?'

'I see no beauty in disobedience and recklessness,' said Armine coldly.



'You are not to be cross and disagreeable!' was her rejoinder, made playfully, caressingly. Having won so far, she could afford to be both caressing and complaisant. 'I will give you a kiss if you will wish me a pleasant ride. I do so long to learn to ride, Armine! Ah!' she said, drawing a deep breath and straightening herself; 'if you only knew how delightful it is to me to feel that I look like a lady, as I used—one with the rest and lifted out of all this miserable poverty and wretchedness into which I have sunk!'

'I am sorry for you, Ione,' said Armine, suddenly vanquished. Any allusion to the poverty into which she had been brought through her love for him always touched him deeply. It was her surest hold over him. 'Sorry for you, and sorry for myself!' he added.

'I do not see why you should be sorry for yourself,' she answered, her sensitive pride in arms at his words. 'Not many men have such a wife as I am to you,' she went on to say, her nostrils quivering; 'neither so loving—nor so worthy to be loved,' she added with frank self-appreciation.

'No? Have I no reason to be sorry when my wife disobeys me to my face?' he replied, trying to speak playfully.

Ione's eyes blazed.

'I cannot disobey you,' she said proudly. 'How can I disobey when I own no authority?'

'Has a husband no authority, Ione?'

'You? over me? None!' she said. 'You owe me obedience if you like, because you owe me gratitude.'

'Gratitude for what? for running me into debt?' he asked, still trying to speak playfully.

'No, for loving you and marrying you,' answered Ione; and Armine made no reply. 'However, I have no time to talk to you now,' she said hurriedly. 'Mr. Formby has come for me; but I thought I would like to say good-bye to you and show you my riding-habit, else I ought to be with him. He is at the door, so come and speak to him, Armine. I cannot go out alone. It is no use your being angry. It is done now and cannot be undone, so you might as well make the best of it. Come!' she added peremptorily.

'Very well,' said Armine.

As she said, it was done now and could not be undone; and what was the good of spoiling the poor girl's day of pleasure by making himself disagreeable? She had disobeyed him; but, after all, was her rebellion such a very heinous sin? Her life was, in truth, both dull and poverty-stricken, and it was only natural that she should wish to take advantage of any enjoyment that might come into it. And Edward Formby was a right good fellow, and to be trusted with Ione of all women in the world. Was he not

destined for Monica? And then Armine was young himself, hence tolerant of unwisdom in the cause of pleasure, and hopeful of miracles when pay-day should come round. And Ione had married him to her own exceeding loss; and that she should find interest, amusement, occupation, in other things beside himself was a relief, which he was ashamed to confess but which was nevertheless true.

Wherefore he went out with her to the door; and by the time he got into the street he was philosophically reconciled to the whole thing, and in no mood to cavil nor remonstrate. Really it did not much signify after all! As life ran with him nothing did signify so very much! And at the worst it would soon all be over—like a bad dream when the morning breaks.

Standing there in the full sunlight, in his shabby morning coat and threadbare, hideous woolwork slippers—Maria Crosby's gift—a little untidy as a man is who has just been rubbing up his hair while thinking over an anxious matter, who has not noticed that his necktie has worked halfway round his throat, that his shirt is crumpled and frayed at the edges, and that one cuff is unbuttoned at the wrist—this handsome but uncared-for young fellow with his look of hopelessness and weariness, and letting himself go, because there was no reason for keeping himself up, made a decided contrast to his wife and friend. Edward, in all the massive niceness of an opulent country gentleman's riding costume, and Ione, fresh and superbly beautiful in her well-fitting dark-green habit, were the salt of society well matched together; while he, pale, uncared for, and disordered, suggested dissolution and decay, and seemed to have no part in this solidity and sober splendour. But it was only of late that he had had this look of weariness and letting himself go. In olden days he was noted for a delicate carefulness of dress which just stopped short of foppery.

'Take care of her,' he said to Edward as he stood by the stirrup of Ione's horse, the groom at the head.

Edward flushed oddly as he answered, rather hurriedly:

'Of course! You may trust me, St. Claire.'

'Don't go too fast, Ione,' was Armine's next exhortation as he put her up and adjusted her skirt and stirrup. 'Remember this is your first day; so be prudent.'

'Of course; when am I ever anything else?' she laughed back for answer.

Her husband smiled, and for an instant the vision of a tall girl walking slowly through the Villa Reale at Naples came like a living picture before his eyes. But he said nothing of this; he only looked up to the sky and said quietly: 'I think the day will keep fair.'

'Dead sure,' echoed Edward, speaking as he wished. 'Come,

Mrs. St. Claire,' he then said, a little impatiently; 'if you are ready we will start.'

'Yes, I am ready,' said Ione, turning a beaming face to her husband as she and her escort went off at a slow walk down the street.

'Poor Ione!' said Armine, turning back out of the sunshine and this picture of shining opulence into the dingy squalor of his home. 'How I wish——'

He did not say out to himself clearly what it was that he wished. He only went again to his study, where he leaned back in his chair, half dreaming and half thinking, but forgetting all about his anxious case and its diagnosis, till recalled to himself by the entrance of a patient—the ragged wife of a drunken day-labourer, who came to him with a loathsome skin-affection, brought on by poverty of food and unwholesome conditions of life generally.

What a sharp and bitter contrast the whole thing was! Edward Formby and himself—Ione, the day's companion of the one, proud and beautiful and looking as opulent as he, but the wife for all time of one who was ground between the hard mill-stones of poverty, and unable to extricate herself or assist him—and all without fault of his; he the sufferer by his poor father's misfortune, and the victim—yes, that was the only right word—the victim of his own compassion and her unreasoning love! How terrible it all was! how terrible! Should he mend matters were he to end them? And if he did, what would she feel, this poor, proud, passionate Ione?—and Monica?

Midway in the village a small crowd of children and idlers had assembled to witness the mount, and comment on what they saw. A few sturdy urchins shouted, and a few dogs barked in concert; and Miss Maria Crosby, from her coign of vantage at the window, saw the whole proceeding.

'Rachel, come here!' she cried. 'Well, I never! What next, I wonder! Here is that hussy, dressed to the nines, riding off with our Mr. Formby. It is downright scandalous, and the neighbourhood should take notice of it! How that foolish young man can submit to it is more than I know; and see how that ne'er-do-well of a Formby watches her, as if she was made of sugar and would melt in his mouth!'

'There is no great harm in it, aunt,' said Rachel, moved partly by natural opposition to her tyrant, and partly by that unspoken something which she carried like a bird in her bosom—her poor little life's unshared secret. 'Ladies and gentlemen do ride together, so why should not they?'

'You know nothing about it,' snapped her aunt. 'I think that Mrs. St. Claire has fairly bewitched you, from the way you stand up for her through thick and thin. I shall begin to think

you are no better than your friends, Rachel, if you go on like this much longer !'

'You may think as badly of me as you like, aunt, but you'll not make me say what I don't believe, or see harm where I don't see it ! Not wild horses should !'

On which she turned away and went upstairs to her own room. And when she was safe in her solitude, she broke down into tears, saying piteously to herself: 'He shouldn't do it ! he shouldn't ! and she a married woman too ! So many as look up to him and think him just perfection—he shouldn't ! he shouldn't !'

## CHAPTER XXIX.

### THE STIRRING OF THE WATERS.

THERE is no more good in having a hat and habit in which one looks like a nineteenth-century *Mélusine*, than there is in having a fashionable walking-costume and jaunty little toque, if one does not make use of one's possessions ; especially if, in gaining them, one has made one's first stand of defiance against an adored husband. Still less is there any good in having a friend like Edward Formby, both able and willing to lighten the dead dulness of life as passed in a country town, where one's means are small and society is shy, and not profiting by one's opportunities. It would be simply waste of privilege and force ; and Ione thought such waste a sin against all the economies of fortune. Wherefore the hat and habit were in constant requisition ; and Edward Formby's clever little bay mare grew to consider the light weight so often poised on her back as part of the conditions of her own existence.

There was no reason why it should not be so. Armine was not jealous—and he had no cause, had he even been inclined to this disastrous vice. Edward Formby was the very model of a *preux chevalier* ; and had Ione been a saint and he her devotee, or had he been a knight consecrated to the defence of her, his lady, against slander and rebuke, he could not have been more respectful, more devoted than he was now, when he carried her over the country and taught her how to get a good seat, and how to keep a firm grip with a light hand. If, when he looked at her, something more came into his face than when he looked at Monica Barrington, for example, and thoughts impossible to put into words passed like hurrying clouds through his mind, the secret shining in his eyes never flowed beyond, and his lips were as mute as his looks were eloquent.

But what Armine allowed and what was not evil in itself, the

neighbourhood would not bear. The morality of a small country place is of a thorny kind, and the sensitiveness of its virtue is only equalled by the activity of its suspicion. It sees evil everywhere; and especially does it see it when a pretty young wife, brought from a strange land, goes riding about the country with an unmarried man of good fortune, whose face is like that of a faun, and who is the possessor of sacks full of wild oats, some as yet unsown, for all the bountiful crop already harvested. Appearances are so all-important in the world! That which is, is nowhere in comparison with that which seems to be. And appearances were not in Ione's favour. Wherefore, there was a general stirring of the waters at Oakhurst, and much whispering of acrid voices, as heads bent close together, and the sense of the countryside was expressed in terms, now vigorous and downright, now suggestive and subtle, but always inimical to the bride and her goings on.

Of those who most strongly condemned, Theodosia Barrington took the lead. As we know, she had for St. Claire that nameless bitterness which, when the fever-fit has passed, women feel for the men for whom they have had a passion which looked like love and was only caprice. Theo had found the young doctor beautiful, and she thought that he had found her desirable. She had put out her little arts, and at one time believed that she had taken him in her net. When she found that she had deceived herself, and that he neither understood nor responded, she turned against him fiercely; giving no account to herself why, only conscious that St. Claire was hateful to her—a kind of moral red-rag which roused her irritation beyond control—and that the best anodyne for this irritation was to find some weak point in his armour where she could strike with effect. And she had found one now in these frequent and much-talked-of rides of Ione with Edward Formby.

'It is disgraceful!' she said to her husband one morning at breakfast. 'I must say I am astonished at Edward Formby. I wonder at his taste, to begin with—all but engaged as he is to such a very different person as your sister Monica—and then I wonder at his insolence and indelicacy to the neighbourhood. Carrying on such a barefaced flirtation as this in a place like Oakhurst, where everything is known, and we are all so intimate—it is really dreadful! What ought we to do, Anthony?'

'Nothing,' said Anthony shortly.

'Nothing! You do not expect that we, the married ladies here, will submit to such a thing as this!' cried his wife, as sharp as he had been curt. 'Nothing! you might as well say——'

She stopped. She had not her simile ready.

'As well say what?' asked her husband, who liked things to be explicit, and did not relish unimaginative supplements.



'That we ought to encourage it,' she answered.

'Encourage what?' Anthony asked. 'What in the name of fortune are you exciting yourself about, Theo? That Edward Formby finds it amusing to ride with the doctor's wife, and the doctor does not object? I do not see that this is your business or mine, my dear girl. Edward can surely look after himself, and the morals of Mrs. St. Claire are not our affair,' he added contemptuously.

'Oh, you are prejudiced in her favour, because she has fuzzy red hair and bright green eyes!' said Theo, tossing up her small, black, shining head, and 'snapping' her dark eyes between their curly lashes. 'All men are alike! A creature like this Mrs. St. Claire, come from no one knows where, and who is no one knows what, makes them half-crazy. And you are no better than the rest, Anthony!'

'I think the wife quite as good as the husband,' returned Anthony.

'That says nothing!' said Theodosia.

Her husband looked at her across the table. She felt his eyes on her, and did not raise hers.

'Yet you made an absurd fuss about him when he was unmarried,' he said, with an accent of surprise. 'You would not listen to my advice then, so now you must get out of the scrape as you can. If you will associate like an equal with your social inferiors, Theo, you must expect to suffer for it. You know the old saying about silk purses and sows' ears!'

'Don't be vulgar, Anthony!' said Theodosia tartly. 'Nothing is so vulgar as this horrid habit of quoting proverbs. I cannot make out where you have picked it up!'

'Nothing so vulgar, perhaps, excepting that of a lady losing her temper for jealousy of a beautiful roturière!' said Anthony slowly and with an unmistakable scowl.

And Theodosia, who had common sense of a kind, said no more. Anthony was her Jumbo, whom she dared not excite beyond what she could control. When he showed symptoms of becoming dangerous she gave in at once.

'No, dear, I am not a bit jealous!' she said with a light laugh, very well done. 'No one in the world is less jealous of other women than I am. I know I am a nice little thing myself, so why should I be? Only one thing would make me jealous, and that would be—what would it be, Anthony?' she broke off with a pretty little caressing intonation, one of the daintiest weapons in her well-stocked armoury of fascination. 'Dear old boo'ful Bear's deserting little wifey for anyone else. Then I should be, I know—madly! dreadfully—to break its poor little heart!'

And when she took this tone her Jumbo was conquered, and she was mistress of the situation.

'You will have to wait a long time for that, Theo,' he said amiably.

'True?—the true truth?' she asked, leaning forward, with her hands clasped before her mouth, leaving only her eyes shining above.

'You silly child!—the true truth!' he returned with a heavy smile. 'There is no one in the world who would suit me so well as you, Theo. You were just made for me!'

'Was I? Now that is nice of you!' said Theo, blowing him a kiss off the tips of her dainty fingers.

But as she blew it—this airy thistledown of love and reconciliation—she thought in clear and intelligible words: 'If I were made for you, I cannot say you were for me; such a temper as you have, you cross old thing, and so dreadful as it is to be always having to keep you in good-humour!'

Though she had failed to incense her husband against the St. Claires, Theodosia did not give up the war which she had persuaded herself it was her duty to wage against them and all their works. She threw her line over many waters, and did her best to stir up the neighbourhood to a proper sense of the indignity done it by this open flirtation between Edward Formby, who was one of their own, and this Mrs. St. Claire, who was the unknown wife of a virtual stranger. Some hung back, and some supported her; a few went beyond her in her virtuous indignation—was she not Mrs. Anthony Barrington? and the Barringtons were social powers at Oakhurst. At all events a hostile party was made, large enough to carry weight by mere force of numbers; and the condemnation which began in a whisper threatened to end in a roar.

But neither Monica nor her mother would join in the cry; and both stood by their belief that there was no need for any cry to join in.

'Mamma, how can you be so blind! at your age and with your experience!' said Theo pertly, when dear Mrs. Barrington protested in her mild and immovable way against suspicions which dishonoured an old friend and neighbour like Edward Formby, and disgraced without hope of redemption a friendless young creature like Mrs. St. Claire. 'One would think you lived in Arcadia or Utopia, or some place like that! You never will see things as they are, and really there is no sense in making out every one just angels without faults.'

'There is less sense, my dear, in seeing faults which do not exist,' returned Mrs. Barrington quietly. 'I should be sorry to think so ill of my neighbours as to condemn them for so small a thing as this. There is surely no great harm in riding out together. You say yourself that Dr. St. Claire sometimes goes with them.'

'Which makes it all the worse,' said Theodosia. 'How can

he, if he is a man of honour, sanction such a thing as this between his wife and another man ?’

‘Such a thing as what, Theodosia ?’ asked Mrs. Barrington. ‘Such a thing as his wife’s riding out under the escort of a safe and honourable gentleman like Edward Formby ?’

‘Safe and honourable ! what rubbish !’ was Theodosia’s rude reply. ‘Edward Formby is no more safe or honourable than anyone else ; and anyone who knows the world and does not go about with their eyes shut, can see what Mrs. St. Claire is like.’

‘She is very charming and very desirous to do what is right, as well as devotedly attached to her husband,’ said Monica. ‘I know her better perhaps than anyone else does, and see her oftener ; and this is all I find in her.’

‘Now, Monica, for Heaven’s sake leave off playing the ingénue,’ said Theodosia with a sudden flush. ‘It was all very well for you to be as infatuated with Dr. St. Claire as you were—as you are, for anything I know—but really to include this impertinent and half-bred young woman in your craze is more than my patience can bear. It is love me love my dog, with a vengeance !—and I object to loving my friends’ dogs. My own are enough !’ she added with a laugh.

‘I do not know what you mean, Theo,’ answered Monica. ‘Common justice, not to speak of humanity, to a young wife like Mrs. St. Claire, away from her own friends and thrown into such a different kind of life from any she has known before, does not seem to me a craze ; to speak against her so bitterly as you do, for no reason that I can see, is much more of a craze if you will think of it. Why should you dislike her so much, dear ? What has she done to you ?’

‘Yes ; why should you dislike her so much, Theodosia ?’ chimed in Mrs. Barrington.

‘And why should you uphold her through everything as if she were your dearest friend ?’ retorted Theodosia, answering Monica, but not her mother. ‘It is so very odd ! I cannot make it out ! Anyone would think you had really been in love with that young man, and that you were even now so infatuated with him as to put up with anything—even Edward Formby’s desertion—rather than find fault with him.’

‘Theo, you are positively too bad,’ said Monica, rising in great agitation. ‘You presume too far.’

‘On what, Monica ? My knowledge ?’ she returned.

‘No ; on my forbearance,’ said Monica. ‘You have no kind of respect for others or control over yourself ; and some day you will get into terrible trouble. Your suspicions are like madness.’

Her face was ashen white, tears stood in her eyes, and her voice broke and trembled with emotion. Never had a random shaft struck so deep nor hit so true ; and never had she felt such a

sense of sacrilege and desecration. Had a Gentile laid his rude hand on the Holy of Holies, the guardian of the ark would not have felt more sacred indignation than she did now, when her feather-headed little sister-in-law tore down that concealing veil which she had reverently wrapped round her innermost soul, and laid it with all its wounds and hidden sorrows bare before the world.

‘You need not look like that, Monica,’ cried Theo with a hard laugh. ‘I have said nothing so very dreadful.’

‘You do not know what you say, Theodosia,’ said Mrs. Barrington, with unwonted sternness. ‘I tell you frankly, my child, if I did not think you sometimes rather unduly excited, I should take more notice of your folly. It is because I pity you that I bear with you. I do not like to think you as wicked as you would be, if you were not a little——’

‘If I were not a little mad,’ said Theodosia with a peal of laughter. ‘Thank you, mamma; but I am no more mad than you are, and I have a great deal clearer insight. You see nothing that goes on before your very eyes, and then I am blamed because I do see.’

‘Hush, Theo! you have said enough for one time,’ said Monica. ‘You know that mother cannot bear the kind of temper that you are in to-day, and I will not hear you speak to her so rudely. Say what you like to me when we are alone, but I will not let her be disturbed.’

‘What humbugs you quiet girls are!’ said Theo, in the manner of one making a philosophical reflection. ‘You are giants, where we, frank ones, are pigmies!’

‘Now, Theodosia, we have had enough of this,’ said Mrs. Barrington, laying down her knitting and looking as if she were preparing to rise from her place. ‘If you persist in this kind of conversation you will oblige me to leave the room. You know my extreme dislike to the whole style of thing—to ill-natured remarks about our neighbours and rude sarcasms to ourselves. Let the subject drop. It has lasted already longer than it ought.’

Theodosia smiled in an odd way.

‘Mamma, I will send you some ostrich’s eggs,’ she said quite naturally, as if she had suddenly changed the conversation and had now taken up a different topic altogether—speaking as if it were a fact and not a metaphor that she was handling.

‘Thank you, my dear, but I do not know what I should do with them,’ returned Mrs. Barrington, accepting the fact, not catching the metaphor.

‘Hatch them,’ said Theo; ‘and then there will be two—one for you and one for Monica.’

‘Thank you, my dear,’ returned Mrs. Barrington again; ‘but I think you had better keep them for yourself and Anthony. You have more space at the Manor than we have here; and ostriches

are such unwieldy creatures, I should not know what to do with them.'

Her pleasantry nearly cost Theodosia more than it was worth, though it amused her greatly at the time. For Mrs. Barrington, who had not seen the point and knew nothing of the hidden intention, spoke to her son when next she saw him about those ostrich's eggs which Theodosia had offered her to hatch, making minute inquiries as to how that process was to be performed without a parent bird, and not sun enough in England to warm the eggs into life as on the burning sands of Africa. Yes, it nearly cost her a great deal more than it had been worth; for Anthony was both proud of, and respectful to, his mother, and, though his wife did twist him round her little finger in all that related to herself, she could not with impunity touch his sacred shrine, or fail in that respect which he felt she ought to pay and his mother should receive. It cost Theodosia a whole battery of caresses and a volume of endearing epithets and misleading interpretations before she was able to clear the air of suspicion or lighten her husband's heavy face of its gathering gloom of wrath—before she was able to bring back to his usual mood of apathetic serenity the man whose dulness bored her to death, but whose wrath would have consumed her alive.

After Theodosia had left the Dower House—and with the contradiction and strange entanglement of human nature she left it to do a kind action to a poor tenant—Mrs. Barrington somewhat broke down. These jarring scenes, which for the last year or so had been more frequent and more discordant than formerly, tried her nerves more than she allowed her daughter-in-law to see. She was so sorry that Anthony had married such an unsatisfactory person!—so sorry that there were no children to employ the young wife's time and soften her nature!—so sorry that she gave way to evil-speaking and slanderous insinuations as she did!—and, above all, so sorry that it was in the obliged order of things to receive her here in this quiet, tranquil, passionless house whenever she chose to come—bringing as she did such a petulant and disturbing atmosphere, which left all things in moral confusion and with the perfume brushed away from the rose-leaves!

'It is most extraordinary how from the first Anthony's wife has made things unpleasant for us about this Dr. St. Claire,' she said, after she had wiped away a few tears which forced themselves for very weariness from her dim eyes and rested on her pale cheeks. 'I cannot understand it; for after all, though he is a very creditable young man, and his wife is a rather superior kind of person for her position, they are not of so much importance as Theodosia's dislike would make them appear. What does all this scandal signify to us? It is not our business.'

'It would be, dear mother, were it true,' said Monica. 'But



it is not. There is no harm in Mrs. St. Claire's riding every now and then with Edward; and Dr. St. Claire is the last man in the world to countenance an impropriety. You know what nice feeling he has—what high principles.'

'Still, one so young and pretty as she cannot be too careful,' said Mrs. Barrington. 'For her own sake she had better be warned. I should like you to speak to her, Monica, kindly and judiciously, you know, but advising her to be careful of appearances. You are the best person to do it; and I should like it done.'

'I do not think she will let me,' said Monica, who naturally shrank from the idea of interfering with Armine St. Claire's wife. 'She is always very nice to me, but I do not think she will like me to give her advice. I fancy she has never been under much control.'

'Then she had better begin now,' returned Mrs. Barrington. 'And it is only the part of a true friend to warn her. At least, it will shut Theodosia's mouth,' she added with a sigh.

'Oh! Theo,' echoed Monica, with an impatience as rare in her as were tears from her mother. 'Nothing will ever cure her of her dreadful habit of gossip and exaggeration. She has such a fatal imagination. It is incurable, for it is born with her.'

'Ah, my dear!' said her mother, as she had often said before: 'it was the most terrible mistake your brother ever made when he brought home Theodosia Huntley as his wife!'

'I think it was, mother,' said Monica.

'Such a fine-looking man as he is, so honourable and true, and with such a position in the county, he might have married where he would—the best in the land. As it is, he has chosen about the worst,' said Mrs. Barrington; and Monica echoed: 'He has indeed!' without an attempt to soften matters for her peccant sister-in-law, or to sweeten her mild mother's distaste by apologies and excuses.

The two ladies, so notoriously free from all love of scandal, ill-nature, or gossip, as they were, could never speak between themselves with favour of Anthony's wife, and they often spoke of her with disfavour. They had done their best to accept her cordially and make her their own: but she tried them too severely. And as time went on she became the source of all their annoyance, all their discomfort. Had it not been for Theodosia, it seemed to Mrs. Barrington, they would not have had a care, nor a displeasure. With her, as one of the family, not a day passed without some crumpling of the rose-leaves, some disturbing influence brought into their life. And perhaps the most painful part of it all, to Mrs. Barrington, was the thought that this small, slight, frothy little nature had power to stir up emotions which to her stood for bad passions—power to ruffle her moral dignity and to destroy both

her peace of mind and serenity of conscience. As if all life were not hacked and hewn, marred and defaced, by the minor agents rather than major!—as if this were not the supreme tragedy of human history—this power of the ignoble to hurt the noble—this cruel capacity of those who are perhaps more thoughtless than actively bad, to embitter the happiness and sear the very virtues of the loving and the true!

Foiled at the Dower House as well as discountenanced by her husband, Theodosia was none the more inclined to let this question of Edward Formby's rides with Ione rest in peace. She was too wise to speak with quotable distinctness of the affair. She did not intend to be referred to as the original hatcher of the cockatrice eggs which were strewn so thickly over poor Ione's path. But she insinuated dimly what she refrained from 'planking down' in unmistakable terms; and, while she stirred the waters vigorously, kept her dredging-machine in the shadow.

This plan answered, as such plans always do answer; and not a doubt existed in the minds of the majority that a flirtation existed between Ione St. Claire and Edward Formby of Hillside, unbecoming to her state as a married woman and to his position as a 'county family.' They said no more than this; which, however, was enough. It was unbecoming; therefore reprehensible; therefore again it was in the charter of their rights as neighbours who did not flirt, and whose characters were mixed up in a general kind of social hash together, to resent—and to show their resentment when occasion occurred and opportunity offered.

And all this time, Armine, Ione, Edward, the three immediately concerned, were like Theodosia's apocryphal ostriches; their heads were buried in the sands of innocence of intention, and they did not dream that the pursuers were upon them.

## CHAPTER XXX.

### UNDER PRESSURE.

WHAT Armine had foreseen had now come to pass. The res angusta domi, always straight, had narrowed beyond the line where dignity of repute or pleasure of existence was possible. Debt had fallen on him like fetters on his wrists, like the chain and bullet round his feet; and wherever he turned he found himself beset by difficulties. Business too went as ill as the rest. He lost two substantial patients—one a man who had had aneurism and been a good paymaster; the other a woman who believed in doctors and lived on drugs.

Then a rival had set up at the other end of the town; and many of the disappointed and estranged patronised the new-

comer with zeal and threw off Armine with haste. Mr. Budd, the son of a country lawyer, was a man whom they could understand and who understood them, they said. He was not like this half-French young fellow with his half-Italian wife—the two together not making one honest English whole, as Jane Wintergreen said sharply in one of those frequent discussions on the St. Claires which filled up the idle hours of Oakhurst. He was a comfortable, conformable sort of person—one of their own. And it was but right to encourage one of their own and give those foreigners the go-by. So they did; working out the law, as set forth by class conscience, with such effect that Mr. Budd had about half the practice before he had been a month in the place.

Within the four walls of home things were no better than they were without. Ione's promise of help and work had vanished into air. To be sure she would have helped, and she would have worked, had she known how. But she soon came to the end of her powers; and of late, a little warped as she was by a vague disquiet for which she had no name, she had not even the wish to do well. The house was a standing disgrace to her mistresshood. There was neither order nor management in it; neither enjoyment in its waste nor economy in its stint. It was a hopeless muddle from end to end—a very thorn-bush of maladministration, wherein she felt her own incapacity, and got angry with things because she was deficient in 'faculty.' Then Edward Formby came with his well-groomed mare, and she was glad to escape from the sordid shabbiness of her own poverty to the elegance and pleasantness of his sufficiency. Which did not make matters better for her husband nor her household.

Debts were accumulating and creditors were getting troublesome. The tailor had sent in his bill for that famous riding-habit which was to be such an economy in saving the wear of old gowns. The butcher and the grocer, the baker and the green-grocer, and all the smaller tradesfolk were beginning to clamour for their money, and to compare among themselves the amounts written off with those still to pay; and the debts more than doubled what was owing to Armine, should all his patients pay all that was due. But some were too poor ever to pay anything at all; and he had not even this delusive margin on which to build a sand-house of hope. What was to be done? In all this large rich world, with its hundreds of thousands of wealthy philanthropists, where could he turn for help? who would hold out a hand to assist him?

In his bachelor days, Armine, as has been said, had ever been the flying-fish of the community—not frankly fraternizing with the little people, nor frankly fraternized with by the great. Now the anomaly of his position was even more apparent as his social circumstances were accentuated by his marriage, and Ione had

added her pride to his in the one case, while in the other she had caused a still stricter exclusion. So that really the two had no friends of any kind, save Edward Formby and Monica Barrington. But this was by-the-by. The real centre of life at this moment was the debt in which they were becoming entangled, and the poverty which was deepening about them.

Things were looking blacker and still blacker, and reports of those gathering debts and the inability of the creditors to get any money out of the young doctor grew daily louder in the community. They reached at last the Dower House, after they had been accepted and digested by Theodosia at the Manor. But it was she who took them to her husband's mother. No one but herself would have dared.

It was at Mrs. Barrington's favourite social hour—at her five-o'clock tea, where Anthony, Theodosia, and Edward Formby one afternoon all found themselves—that the little wife shouldered the conversation on to her former favourite and present red-rag.

'By the way,' she said abruptly, turning her sharp black eyes full on Edward, 'those St. Claire people seem to be in a very bad way. I hear awful things of their debt and extravagance, and how no one can be paid a farthing. It is really very disgraceful! and she all the time giving herself the airs of a lady, and he so ridiculously like a hairdresser's assistant!'

Edward's ruddy face became a still ruddier hue; Monica's, paler and more under control, grew a shade whiter.

'I see a good deal of them,' said Edward bluntly; 'and I see no extravagance.'

'Oh, I forgot!' said Theo; 'you are one of Mrs. St. Claire's adorers; so it is not likely you would see anything in her to which to object. If she had committed murder, I dare say you would find out that she had done quite right, and would acquit her on the plea of extenuating circumstances. I only hope she will not some day. She looks capable of it!'

'My dear Theodosia!' said Mrs. Barrington in her mild manner of reproof.

Anthony gave a short laugh; Edward pulled at his moustache, and looked as if he had suddenly lost the use of speech.

'Another cup of tea, Theo?' asked Monica in her dreamy way, as if she had not heard what had been said.

'Don't you think so?' returned Theo for all answer, speaking to her sister-in-law.

'Think what?' replied Monica, busied with the cream-jug, which she seemed to find it difficult to place on the tea-tray.

'That Mrs. St. Claire is like a murderess, and her husband like a hairdresser's assistant.'

'No, I do not think either one or the other,' said Monica. 'Anthony, more tea?' she added.

'We have all had enough tea,' said Theodosia testily. 'You are so funny, Monica! Who ever does take more than one cup of afternoon tea? And, dear, do leave that cream-jug alone! You make such a noise with the spoons and things, it fidgets me to death to hear you!'

'My dear Theodosia!' said Mrs. Barrington again, gravely.

'Don't bully Monica, Theo,' said Anthony.

'But she does make a noise when she pushes the cups and things about; and it does fidget me to see her,' said Theo. 'And it is only because I am talking of the St. Claires. She has taken it into her head to protect them, just as Edward has. Really, people are very odd!'

'Oh, Mrs. Anthony! how you like to chaff!' said Edward Formby with a forced laugh.

It was not for him to measure swords with this intellectual little Flibbertigibbet. It would be like the contest of a cockchafer and a gnat. All he could do was to deprecate good-humouredly, and call that chaff which was in point of fact something much more solid.

'Well, I am sure it is odd that you should care to be so much with her as you are—a young woman without two ideas in her head!' said Theo, lifting up her eyebrows. 'I think Mrs. St. Claire one of the most stupid people I have ever seen. She never says anything worth hearing; she never opens a book or seems to have heard of any to open. She is frightfully ignorant and common; yet you can ride out with her day after day, day after day, and never weary of her, just a doll as she is! And you too, Monica, who go in for high art and poetry and æsthetics, and all that—how can you uphold her or pretend to like her as you do? It is all a mystery to me, I confess!'

'What makes you dislike her so much?' asked Monica quietly; but no one, save Theo herself, noticed that she did not look at her when she spoke, and that her gentle face had a certain pained look of embarrassment on it.

'I do not pay her the compliment of disliking her,' said Theo, with a laugh. 'I think her forward and stupid and pretentious and unladylike; and I think her husband is no better than she is. And I always have thought so. Only that you and mamma spoil him so much, and took him so completely out of his position, I would never have asked him to the Manor. But I did not like to hang back when you made yourselves so conspicuously his friends. It seemed like a slight on you. But I am very sorry that I did now, with these disgraceful debts and everything! It is altogether most unpleasant, and I wish they would leave the place.'

'I see no unpleasantness but what you make for yourself, my dear,' said Mrs. Barrington. 'No one that I know of speaks of these things; and at the worst they are not our affair.'



'Theo is right, mother,' said Anthony, in his slow, impassive way. 'They have been awfully spoilt here and taken out of their proper place; that is not to be denied; and they are in debt to every one about, and the whole place is ringing with it. And it is disgraceful and unpleasant in the extreme. But after all, as you say, it is not our affair, and each one is free to act as seems best to himself.'

This seemed as if it would include his mother's and sister's freedom to protect the St. Claires if they would. It meant nothing of the kind. It was an allowance which covered only Edward Formby, and what the world had agreed to call his goings on with Ione.

'Shall we talk of something else?' said Mrs. Barrington. 'I have no great love at any time for discussing my neighbours, and if I cannot hear good of them I prefer not to hear anything at all. I confess I see nothing reprehensible in the St. Claires, and I do not care to hear gossip.'

'That is right, Mrs. Barrington!' said Edward heartily. 'It does no good to pick holes in people's coats. And one can if one likes—anywhere and everywhere!'

'One need not pick them in the St. Claires,' said Theodosia with her shrill laugh. 'They are there already. And that young lady must take care that she does not make another—and the biggest of all!' she added, with a meaning look to Edward.

Aiming at pigeons and shooting of crows is one of the most familiar experiences of our life; and this was what Theodosia Barrington now did by her unfriendliness to the St. Claires. She had wished to draw down on them the indignation she had honestly convinced herself they deserved, and instead of this she raised up for them an activity of friendship which would not have been without her. The tares which she had thought to sow came up as fruitful corn; and Monica and Edward, so far from being checked or chilled, were stimulated and warmed.

Soon after this last shaft the Anthony Barringtons left, and then Edward Formby got up to go.

'Come down the steps, Edward,' said Monica, when he took up his hat. 'I want to show you some new Brahmas Price has just bought. Price says they are superb, but I should like you to see them.'

'All right,' said Edward, with the slightest possible touch of embarrassment.

Monica was always perfectly simple with him, but he was ever a little out of gear with her. He knew that he was expected to marry her, or at least to ask her; and she knew that she would not accept him were he to offer. Hence he felt he had not done his duty; and she was grateful that he had spared her the pain of not doing hers—if indeed it were her duty to marry for the fitness of things, and not for the desire of her heart.

‘Is it true what Theo says of the St. Claires—that they are so deeply in debt?’ she asked as she was going down the steps.

‘I am afraid some of it is true,’ he answered. ‘I think Mrs. Anthony exaggerated, you know; but I fancy there is some fire under the smoke. There generally is.’

‘I am so sorry,’ said Monica. ‘Can nothing be done for them?’

She looked up into his face when she said this. Her own was anxious and troubled—strangely so for the occasion, Edward thought to himself—just a passing thought, not striking deep and not clinging long.

‘What can?’ he answered.

‘I do not know,’ said Monica. ‘Some one might lend them some money. Unfortunately I cannot, else I would. I would send Mrs. St. Claire a present anonymously, and take care that she did not find out where it came from.’

As she said this, Monica’s pretty short upper lip trembled, and she looked down shyly.

‘Ah! that would be a good way,’ said Edward.

‘But I cannot do it!’ said Monica. ‘Only yesterday Anthony took my bank-book and insisted on investing what I had. He was vexed, too, that I had not more; and I am such a bad woman of business, I could not account for certain sums. So he drew out all but a mere pittance, saying I was not fit to be trusted with money; and now I am quite poor.’

‘Anthony was right,’ said Edward. ‘You ought to invest your savings, Monica.’

‘So he says, but I cannot see it,’ was her reply. ‘I have no one to save for, and it simply prevents my doing as I like—helping some one, for instance, in whom I feel so much interest as in this poor *déplacée* Mrs. St. Claire.’

‘Don’t worry yourself,’ said Edward. ‘Save your money, Monica. If you have no one to leave it to now, you may have some day.’

‘I think I never shall,’ she answered gently.

‘No?’ he said, not looking at her. ‘But you will marry some day, my dear.’

‘Never!’ she said. ‘I shall never marry,’ Edward. ‘Nothing should ever induce me to leave my mother. I do not intend to marry—ever—anyone.’

She repeated this emphatically;—she looking up at him, he looking away into the distance, but conscious of her eyes.

He gave a deep sigh. It might have been for disappointment, but it might also have been for relief. He brought his eyes back from the distance and turned them down on her uplifted face. Something that was not a tear, but looked like the precursor of tears shone in his eyes, and made them soft and dark.

'You are the best girl in the word, Monica,' he said tenderly. 'You ought to be canonised. They have made worse saints than you, my dear!'

'And better!' she laughed with a pretty shake of her head. 'If I were a saint, I would extend my protection to these poor young people,' she added, bringing the conversation back again to its starting-point.

'So you shall, through me,' he returned. 'I will see to it all. I will go to St. Claire to-day, and tell him I will pull him through, and he shall not suffer. Do not be uneasy. My God, no!'

He said these last words under his breath, and with profound agitation. Did he mean them for Monica or Ione?

'Ah, how good you are, Edward!' said Monica. 'I always knew that you were to be depended on!'

'I hope so,' he returned with a deep flush.

Somehow her praise stung rather than soothed him, as his had pained rather than pleased her. Was he in very truth to be always depended on? Could Monica say that for the past? He would not ask himself—should Armine be able to say it for all the future? And Monica, in like manner, felt that were Edward to know all that had been in her heart in time past for Armine, he would scarcely call her a saint now, because she wished to see him free of debt and lifted above distress.

And with this they came to the last of the steps, and turned round to the poultry-yard, where the Brahmas strutted in their allotted compound, the innocent pretext for this important talk.

After a brief inspection of the handsome fowls, in which he was at once interested, as became a country gentleman solicitous for pure breeds, and for which Monica did not care two straws, Edward took his leave—the two never so much like lovers, never so sincerely attached as now when they had just consulted together for the benefit of the woman who called Armine her husband—of the man who owned Ione as his wife.

Sure enough, the next morning Armine St. Claire held in his hands Edward Formby's cheque, which was to release him—and Ione—from all present embarrassment, and enable them to 'see about them a little,' as a note which accompanied the cheque expressed it. That note was written in Edward Formby's special style—badly spelt and full of grammatical errors; but, as once before, it was so full of genuine kindness and delicacy that its errors were more precious than other folks' exactness. It was like manna in the wilderness, like a cup of water in the desert; and though Armine might have refused it had he been alone—preferring to submit to sorrow rather than save himself by another man's hand—yet now, with Ione on his neck—Ione to suffer as well as himself—he yielded to the temptation; and, under pressure as he was, accepted the offer of release with gratitude.

With gratitude ? Yes ; but also with shame ; also with reluctance. It wounded his pride, his conscience, his self-respect. Yet, he could not doom Ione to distress from which any sacrifice of himself could deliver her. He had bound himself to be her sacrifice, and he must fulfil his task to the end. But this was one of the bitterest moments of all—one of the heaviest of the burdens to carry.

On his side Edward had an uneasy feeling that he could not get rid of, try as hard and manfully as he would. He seemed to himself to have bought something which he could never claim and never possess ; and the immediate consequence of that small monetary transaction was his sudden departure for Newmarket, where races were on hand, and where he might lose, in heavy bets and perilous fancies, the haunting image of Ione St. Claire.

Meanwhile, of all concerned, Monica was the only one really satisfied, and Ione was the only one in the dark. But the materials were too explosive, and set too near to danger, for peace to be of long continuance ; and it was only a question of time when the catastrophe should come.

## CHAPTER XXXI.

### THE NEW ARRIVAL.

IN the midst of all this gathering excitement about the St. Claires, old Thornton, of High Street, the confectioner, fancy bread-maker, and general baker of Oakhurst, 'passed in his checks,' and died suddenly of apoplexy. As he had amassed a small competency, his widow, who had no children to help her in the weakness of her advancing years, and who had been a hard worker in her past ones, set up the business for sale ; and waited for a purchaser.

Many looked into the affair and some made impossible proposals, but no one came to a successful issue ; when suddenly the modest sum demanded was paid down on the nail ; the shop-fixtures, dwelling-house, good-will, and brick oven were all taken over in the account ; and a new man entered on the old place.

He was a foreigner, speaking English of a somewhat dislocated kind, but good enough to be understood ; though he did call all things, animate and inanimate, 'he' and 'his,' and used the verb 'to make' with an indiscriminate generosity that covered everything. This, however, was a small matter ; the large one was that he paid the money down after a certain course of haggling wherein he had to give way, and where, keen as he was, he found Mrs. Thornton his worthy match. Hence there was no need to question his solvency nor to look into his antecedents. His crisp bank-notes were his sponsors, and he wanted no others.

It was against the widow's conscience to sell the concern to a foreigner, whose existence she qualified by an epithet more racy than nice. But what was to be done, she said, when one's own would not come forward as they should? If home public spirit was dead she had to do the best she could with what she could get from abroad. The wear and tear of the business was too much for her since her good man's death, and if she could not get rid of it, it would soon get rid of her.

This she said by way of excuse and apology to the neighbourhood—the neighbourhood patriotically not approving of the transfer, and doubtful whether it would take kindly to the change.

That change indeed was very thorough. The whole aspect of the shop, as well as the manner of doing business, was altered; and Oakhurst was not fond of innovations. There was the Sunday-dinner baking as of old, but the result was not so satisfactory as in Joe Thornton's time; for the pies came out at one time sodden and at another burned. The bread, too, was queer and had an odd taste, as if spice or herbs were put into it; and the cakes were not the cakes of bygone times. But they were good in their own way—sometimes over-flavoured with rum perhaps, and sometimes too dry and leathery; but for the most part they were approved of; and the sweets were acknowledged to be perfection. The shop was differently decorated and differently stocked throughout from what it had been in times past. Instead of the tall bottles of rose-lozenges and barley-sugar, bulls'-eyes and pear-drops, with all the other well-known sweeties dear to British youth; instead of the opaque white and transparent yellow glass moulds, to represent blanc-mange and jelly—the plates of Bath-buns and raspberry tarts, of sponge-cakes and macaroons, covered with yellow muslin to keep them from the wasps and flies—there were now piles of lemons and tiers of red-coloured jelly, with variegated sweets of odd shapes and strange compounds, the like of which had never been seen in Oakhurst since Oakhurst began. There were fruit tarts, too, made in plates without a covering crust; which aroused the scornful mirth of all good housewives. 'Strawberries and cherries laid on paste in that daftlike fashion!' they said, with their heads in the air and their lips crisped as tight as closed purses. 'Not perhaps bad in themselves; but lor-a-mussy, not to be compared to our own fruit pies, where a body could cut and come again, and have his fill of good rich flaky crust, which was something to be proud of when it was done!' But, indeed, all the things were made more for show than use—more as displays of colour and ingenuity than as stays to hungry stomachs. But while it was all fresh it was the town's talk and the town's show. The mob of children round the window impeded traffic and gave the sentiment of popular excitement; a sentiment which was not lessened when sometimes a swarthy-complexioned man



would dash out from the darkness behind the shop and send the whole cohort flying with the violence of his gestures, the roar of his unknown tongue, the fury in his eyes, and the impression generally which he left on them all of being the very devil himself incarnate. But sometimes he was quite the other way; and then he would give both cakes and sweeties to the little ones looking with longing eyes at that raree-show of good things. And it got to be noticed that when he did thus scatter his largesse, he always gave the biggest portion to the fairhaired little girls, demanding for his reward kisses which it terrified them to death to give.

In a short time, however, the keen eyes of the good housewives aforesaid noted that not only was all this pristine brilliancy getting sadly dashed, but that if you wanted either your full shilling's-worth, or the perfection of cleanliness, you had better not go to the shop where old Joe Thornton had made his fortune by honest English ways which every one could understand, and where all had been as clean as a new pin. Now, matters were very different. Those queer whisks and feather-brushes, which were what the foreigner used for keeping things clean, were not equal to the British blue-checked duster and wholesome soap and water. And you could never believe his word when he said that his bread or his cakes had been baked fresh to-day. For if flavour and consistency went for anything it was a moral certainty that neither loaf nor cake had seen the oven for a week or more! He was unbusinesslike, too, in his manner of dealing. He had to be looked after pretty sharply in the matter of change; he often charged one price to-day and another to-morrow for the very identical thing—and then he would take less than what he first said; he sent in his bills twice, but on the other hand he often forgot to send them in at all, and would let people run into debt for bread and baking with a looseness of grip enough to make old Joe Thornton turn in his grave. It was all so slipshod and uncertain, no one knew where to have him; and, as for keeping to his time—as for building on his promise to have that pie baked by half-past twelve, or that cake made by noon to-morrow—you might as well have expected the rain to fall from a cloudless sky, or the hoar frost to last if the wind changed to the south.

The real proprietor of the concern was rarely visible. After he had concluded with Mrs. Thornton he retired to the little room behind the shop, or to the bakery, where he worked with his own hands or directed his assistant, and where both he and that assistant—a foreigner like himself—smoked all day long, to the disgust of the women, who swore that they found cigar-ash over their potatoes and the flavour of tobacco in their gravy. This incessant smoking was such an offence to the feelings of the wives that some talk was made of setting up against the interloper a

rival establishment to be conducted on pure English principles; but as yet no one had come forward.

The sensitive Protestantism, too, of the place was alarmed. It saw the shadow of Jesuitism in the fact of the new-comer's strangerhood; and when it leaked out that he was an Italian, every one made sure that this Trivellato, as he called himself, was a brigand who would lurk round the corner with a dagger in the dark, and not only manage to disseminate popery with his sugar but would also add murder to his handicraft. But—the confectionery was good, the sweets were perfection, and the bread and pies grew gradually more home-like; and as no one had been found with his throat cut in a dark alley, and no priests had been seen stealing about the lanes, the fears which had been so rife in the beginning somewhat died away, and the new confectioner's shop became rather the fashion than otherwise.

All this time the head man was never seen behind the counter. He was to be heard speaking in the little room, where he smoked and peeped through the window of the door to watch what was going on. And the women had seen him in the bakehouse when they went with their pies and toad-in-the-holes for Sunday. But the gentry had to be content with a young man who had been a short time in London; who wore his hair parted down the middle and cut into festoons like feathers on his forehead, as St. Claire had worn his when he first came to Oakhurst; and who made as deadly havoc with the hearts of the young girls of his own class as Armine had made with those of the second set in the first year of his novitiate. But he spoke English a little more idiomatically than did his proprietor, and also he understood rather better how to deal with the people. He was as deft at making lies as that proprietor was at making sweets; and altogether the concern prospered, in spite of loose business habits, stale pastry sold fresh, two prices asked and a third taken, and the flavour of tobacco in the gravy.

Somehow, no one knew why, the new shop with all it included of popery, possible assassination, and un-English qualities in general, was connected in the public mind with Mrs. Armine St. Claire. The two were twin-cherries off the same tree; but they were cherries with cankered hearts, and not to be approved of at any price. The tiers on tiers of transparent red-coloured jelly and piles of golden lemons were as pretty to look at in their own way as the young bride's red-gold hair and lissom figure; but we want something more than mere prettiness—as Jane Wintergreen said, her sharp nose high in the air—'and handsome is as handsome does.'

Jane, uncompromising and staunch, had steadily vilified the productions and personality of the new confectioner from the beginning. She did not like new-fangled ways, she said sharply, when asked what she thought of this man's, this Trivellato's,

sweets. She liked to know what she ate, and objected to being poisoned by outlandish condiments. Nevertheless, she sometimes went to the shop when hard pressed for a make-up and had to look about her, but she always went under protest, and with the feeling of deserting the Union Jack for the tricolour.

Naturally, like all the rest, Ione went to pay the new place a visit, to inspect the goods, and pronounce on their merits.

‘They are just like Guli’s!’ she said in Italian with a laugh as she looked at the sausages and galantines, the vegetables and fruits, all made of sweets.

She was radiant as she said this. She had not been happy in Palermo, and she was—or had been?—happy here in Oakhurst. All the same, it made her laugh with joy to see things which reminded her of her old home; and she felt as if this new establishment were part of herself.

The dark-skinned, soft-eyed, soft-spoken young fellow, standing with his hat on his head behind the counter, was overjoyed to hear his native tongue spoken by one who was evidently a Sicilian; and the conversation between the two became quite animated. As a mark of special respect he took off his hat which he wore because of the draughts, and braved catching cold in this awful English climate like a hero at the cannon’s mouth. For one so proud and Brahminical as Ione, the conversation was more than animated. It was friendly. The young man told her one or two things about the business, and among others that he was not the *padrone*. He, the *padrone*, did not come into the shop. He lived there—pointing backward to the rooms behind—where he made his things; for he was a gentleman, and could make *cassata* and *pecorelle* as well as Guli himself.

‘Is he a Sicilian?’ asked Ione. ‘I hear that you are.’

‘Sissignora,’ said the man, Giuseppe; ‘he is a Palermitan.’

‘What is his name?’ she asked.

‘Trivellato.’

‘I can see that for myself; it is over the shop,’ said Ione disdainfully. ‘I mean his little name.’

‘Giovanni.’

She shook her forefinger before her face with an Italian gesture.

‘I do not know him,’ she said. ‘Giovanni Trivellato. No! I do not remember him.’

Giuseppe looked distressed.

‘No?’ he said in a tone of regret, as if it were a sorrow to all concerned.

All this time two dark gleaming eyes were watching through the window of the door leading into the back-parlour; and that door, ajar, allowed every word that was spoken in the shop to be clearly heard by the listener within.

'The same, the same, and yet more beautiful than ever!' said the man to himself in Sicilian. 'My life! my soul! you will come to me at last.'

This talk with Giuseppe pleased Ione, not unnaturally; and she often went to the shop for the ostensible purpose of buying cakes and ordering sweets; but in reality to speak Sicilian and discuss Palermo. Of course her frequent visits were noticed. Miss Maria Crosby's side-window commanded the whole length of the street—the doctor's house with the rest; her front faced Trivellato's. Hence all that took place between earth and sky, within the range of her vision, she saw and commented on according to her nature. And, through her, handles for scourges to lay on the backs of social sinners were never wanting in Oakhurst. Just now Ione St. Claire was the sinner *par excellence* of the community; and between those frequent rides with Edward Formby, and this perpetual running in and out of the new confectioner's, Miss Maria was well set up in material. The double sin was the common talk of Oakhurst; and the only people who did not hear it were Ione herself, her husband, and Edward Formby.

One evening Ione was out rather later than usual. She had been riding with Edward, and, still in her riding-habit as she was, she went up the street to Trivellato's to order some *dolci* for their neglected and rather scanty dinner.

'We have no cassata, Signora,' said Giuseppe with an innocent face. 'We have some new *dolci* in the inner room, if the signora will go in to see them.'

'*Va bene*,' said Ione.

She passed through the little trap of the counter, and went on into comparative darkness. A man was standing by the table, holding the back of a chair as if his hands were a vice, or that wooden rail were a live thing that he could press to death. She looked into his face, and at a glance recognised that swarthy skin, those gleaming eyes, that strange Saracenic countenance with its hidden passion and outward quiet smoothness.

'Vincenzo!' she said with almost a scream. 'What are you doing here? Why have you come?'

'To take care of you, signora,' he said gently. 'The day will come when you will want me.'

'Madman! how should I want you!' she said haughtily. 'How should you take care of me! I have my husband!'

'True, Signora, you have your husband,' said Vincenzo slowly.

'And I want no one else,' she returned quickly.

'Friends do no harm,' he said.

'Friends! You forget yourself, Vincenzo. Can a servant be my friend?' she said with unspeakable pride.

His dark eyes glistened like two polished stones played on by a fiery light.

‘A dog may be a friend!’ he said, humbly as to mere manner; and yet there was something in the whole spirit of the man that was arrogant and authoritative and by no means humble and subservient as he wished to appear.

‘You are a dog, but you can never be of use to me,’ said Ione.

His eyes flashed.

‘We shall see,’ he answered in a low voice.

‘What do you mean, Vincenzo?’ she asked, more agitated than she cared to show. ‘What help, what friendship can I want? I who have all that life can give me!’

‘The Signora is alone here—a stranger like myself,’ he said. ‘She has married a man who is not worthy of her. No! hear me out!’ he said, raising his voice in command, as Ione prepared to speak. ‘The Signora loves him, therefore she does not see; but those who love her do see. This cold wooden Englishman is not worthy of her. I say it again and yet again. And the day will come when the Signora will know that I have spoken truth.’

‘Insolent! Brigand! Mafiose!’ cried Ione, transported with passion.

Vincenzo bent his head.

‘Be it so,’ he answered. ‘All the same, I am the Signora’s friend here. She has none other! And the day will come when she will say, “Vincenzo, I want you; help me!”’

‘I—to you? Never!’ she said, all her pride and passion surging like a torrent in her soul.

Vincenzo touched her riding-habit.

‘The Signora is young, beautiful, alone here,’ he said; ‘and her husband, this white-blooded Englishman, gives her into the hands of a man like this Signore, who takes her for hours into the far-off country, where no one knows where they go nor what they do. Is that love, Signora? is that the care an Italian would have for his wife? No *facchino* among us would be so negligent of his honour, or expose his wife to so much danger. Would your husband, if he were worthy of you—if—here he bent his head close to Ione’s, and hissed between his teeth—‘if he loved you?’

‘Brigand!’ said Ione again, striking his face with her gloved hand. ‘How dare you say such things to me?’

‘How dare I? And if I dare not, who should?’ said Vincenzo, seizing her wrists. ‘Do you know who I am, Signora Ione?’

‘A slave! a mafiose!’ cried Ione passionately. ‘And I will give you up to the police!’

He laughed.

‘Mafiose, yes,’ he said. ‘I can confess that here. Mafiose and something more. I am your cousin, Signora Ione; and I love you. Now, betray me if you dare!’

‘You lie, Vincenzo, and I do not believe you,’ she said, shaking



off his hands and confronting him with the same pride and anger as before. 'My cousin? you? Liar! You are no cousin of mine, and I will have you shot! You shall be hunted out of England by the police! you shall be shot,' she repeated.

'You have no mafia here,' he answered, with a quick return to his former humble manner; 'and the police cannot touch me, Signora. I have offended against no law, and I am in a free country. I will stay here to make *cassata* and *pecorelle* for the good English people, and to watch over your safety. I tell you again, the time will come when you will want me!'

'Never! never! never!' cried Ione. 'I will never enter your shop again, Vincenzo. Insolent! Mafiose! You shall never see me here again.'

'You will come to-morrow,' he said slowly. 'To-morrow I shall have made some new *dolci*, and la Signora shall have her choice. You will come; do you hear? Fatherless and motherless, cast off by those who adopted you, neglected and unloved by your husband, you have only me—and always me—this poor Vincenzo who was your servant at Palermo and who is your protector in England—this poor Vincenzo who is your cousin—and who loves you!'

## CHAPTER XXXII.

### WARS AND RUMOURS OF WARS.

IONE's halcyon days were over. Her bird of love no longer nested on a waveless sea, but beat its wings in pain and storm over the spot where once it had brooded in divinest peace. On all sides strange ills beset her, some of which she knew, while of others she saw only the advancing shadows. Of these ills the presence of Vincenzo here at Oakhurst, and the hateful revelation of her parentage which he had now made to her in full, were the most solid—doubts of her husband's love the most agonising. Before Vincenzo's arrival these doubts had already at times vaguely traversed her brain; not as thoughts made out and consolidated, but as dim fears more prophetic than actual—spiritual protoplasm lying in the depths and not yet shaped into active life. Now things were different. Through the revelation of her birth and the degradation, including his own relationship, which it involved, Vincenzo held her as a boy holds a captive bird. She was in his power for anything that he chose to demand; and his choice was to detach her from her husband by proving to her that she was not loved. What ulterior plans he might have, he carefully concealed; and for the present he contented himself with dropping

into her mind disbeliefs which were like the poison that was dropped into the ear of the king.

How should she not doubt that man whom she so loved, and for whom she had given up her all! she used to think, as she watched Armine between her half-closed lids when he sat there at the other side of the table, preoccupied, lost in thought, absent, uncompanionable. If she asked him, as she often did, peremptorily, abruptly, Of what was he thinking? he used to start as if he had been suddenly awakened out of sleep, and always made the same answer: 'My cases, dear.'

How she hated his profession which absorbed him so completely, and how jealous she was of its claims and of all his patients! As for his female patients, she never believed in their illnesses. They were only in love with Armine, and were trying to seduce him from his allegiance to herself. She often made scenes at home, and abroad too; even about cottagers' wives and labourers' daughters; scenes which were both bitter and loving, but of which the bitterness remained when the love was forgotten. Of late, however, Armine had not given her the details which, in the beginning, he thought might interest her and somewhat divert her passion for himself into a calmer and more generalised philanthropy. When he saw how she took them, and after she had once or twice made herself hateful and him ridiculous, then he closed the book and told her no more. And his silence was a greater grievance to her than his confidences had been the source of pain and misleading.

He did not talk much to her on any matter; and the evenings which should have been hers—the pleasaunce of her soul, where her love might have had full liberty and expansion—were used for his work, which took him away from her. And nothing that she could do brought him nearer. If she tried to bend him by the imperious passion of her own love she wearied him. If she gave way to her temper, as she did not infrequently, she distressed but did not warm him; if she left him to himself he was tranquil and at ease, but he was so much the farther from her, and none the more loving because he was undisturbed. He was sweet and kind and gentle, but he was not loving; and she recognised the difference.

But if he did not love her, whom then did he love? As yet she had not fastened on one for all her sporadic jealousy of all. Still, she could not believe that he was indifferent to every one. He had sworn that nothing but poverty stood between them when he had sought to break his engagement at Palermo—he had sworn it, and he was not a man to lie. But she had begun to doubt him now. He did not love her as she counted love; then it must be that some other held what she had lost. Who was she? If she could discover her!—well, and then? Then, thought

Ione to herself, there was Vincenzo within call—Vincenzo who would do her will let it be what it would, and who was not a mafioso for nothing. But of all this not a line was sharply defined. She only knew that she was standing on the edge of an abyss, and that some day she should go over.

Meanwhile, she kept Vincenzo's secret—and her own; in spite of her pride, her reluctance, her fierce disdain, her personal loathing for the man, went constantly to the confectioner's shop, because bidden by its master, who now was also hers, and who set a time of return at each visit; rode out with Edward Formby; and offered herself as a target for all the ill-nature and evil-speaking of Oakhurst.

That riding had become her greatest and indeed her sole pleasure. She was only happy now when going at a hard gallop for miles at a stretch—working off the fever that burnt in her veins in the wild excitement of her rapid going. Edward was too hard a rider himself to stint her passionate pace. The fever was in his veins too; but these long swift rides did nothing towards subduing it. On the contrary, they were the food on which it fed. So the two went about the lanes and over the moor at racing speed; and those who found the thing obnoxious at all found it doubly evil because of the number of miles which were covered in a given number of minutes.

At last rumour grew so loud and condemnation so distinct that Monica, obeying her mother's desire, but certain of predestined failure, undertook the perilous task of preaching prudence to Ione, and some abatement in these long and frequent rides with Edward Formby of Hillside. It was a perilous task and failure was predestined; so far she knew; yet for the wife of Armine St. Claire she was willing to undergo defeat and imperil her own pride in the forlorn hope of doing good for the future, if not for the immediate present.

'There can be no harm where there is no wrong,' said Ione, holding up her head like a young queen, when the girl whom her husband loved had very gently advised her to give up these constant and rapid excursions.

'No, of course there is no wrong; but people are so censorious, and we must attend to appearances,' said Monica.

'In England? England is a free country!' cried Ione.

'Politically, yes; conventionally, a thousand times no!' answered Monica with a deprecating little smile. 'I should say we were far more conventional than even the Italians—at least, about our young married women. Girls are freer.'

'So? Then I shall teach you better,' said Ione superbly. 'In Italy a married woman can do what she likes if her husband does not object. And my husband does not object to my riding with

Mr. Formby. On the contrary—he likes it. It takes me off his hands and out of his way,’ she added bitterly.

Monica turned her eyes to the window and looked out on the ragged and neglected square of ground which represented the garden. Ione’s words went into her heart like drops of burning lead. Reading between the lines as she did, what a mournful revelation they gave!

‘He cannot wish to get you off his hands or out of his way, dear Mrs. St. Claire,’ she said after a pause, turning back to Ione with a half-caressing, half-admiring intonation. ‘You are too charming, and your marriage is too young for that! But is it not just possible that he may be a little hurt and very proud, foolishly proud?—and that he may not like your being so much with another man, yet will not complain nor object? People are so odd sometimes! and jealousy shows itself in such different ways!’

Ione’s nostrils quivered, and her lips drew themselves in a thin hard line.

‘Armine jealous of me!’ she said scornfully. ‘That is simple nonsense, Miss Barrington. Were I to be jealous of him—you know that would be more to the purpose!’

She spoke at random, not meaning more than that Monica, like all the world, and as one only of the rest, knew Armine St. Claire’s delinquencies, and how much she, this ill-treated Ione, had to suffer.

Monica’s quiet face changed as much as colour changes under the flash of light. For a moment she was staggered. How much did Ione know? How much had she divined? Or was it only a chance shot? At the worst there was nothing overt to know; and now, nothing on her side, concealed. It was, however, a moment or two before she quite recovered herself and dared trust her voice. When she did, she said quietly:

‘I know nothing that should make you jealous of your husband; nor does anyone else.’

‘I want no stranger to assure me of that,’ said Ione harshly.

‘Have I been impertinent?’ said Monica gently.

‘Yes, very,’ answered the other. ‘Shamefully insolent—unpardonably. You have taken a liberty I shall never forgive,’ she went on, her passion rising with the words—‘a liberty no one has ever dared to take before, and no one but yourself would dare to take now.’

‘Forgive me,’ said Monica. ‘If I have been impertinent, and have taken a liberty, it is only because I am your friend, dear Mrs. St. Claire, and because I know this place, and you do not.’

‘And why should you be my friend?’ asked Ione slowly, her lips narrowed to a thread, her eyes, half closed, leaving only that glittering green line between the lids, her nostrils palpitating, her

long white hands clenched one within the other. 'I have done nothing that should make you my friend, so devoted as this. Why is it, Miss Barrington?'

'Do you think there is nothing in your position to interest one?' said Monica. 'You are alone here, away from all your own people; your husband's profession leaves you much to yourself; you do not know the peculiarities of the place nor the customs of English society; and your husband has been our friend for some time now. That is why I take an interest in you, and have ventured on a liberty in the hope of being of service to you.'

'Because my husband has been your friend for some time?' repeated Ione in the same slow voice, her face not altering, not softening, not relaxing one hair's breadth of its stony viciousness, its bitter suspicion.

'In the beginning, yes,' answered Monica steadily. 'And now because of yourself.'

'I am much obliged to you,' said Ione, keeping her glittering eyes still fixed on Monica's pallid face. 'But will you understand this is never to happen again? Never! never! If you wish to keep me as—an acquaintance'—she would not say friend—friend to a woman who had just confessed to an interest in Armine in those dark years when she, Ione, had not known him? *per Bacco*, no! She would die rather!—'as an acquaintance, Miss Barrington, will you kindly understand that you are not to interfere in my actions, nor take it on yourself to advise me, no matter what I do, whether I ride every day with Mr. Formby or not, either because you have an interest in me, or have been my husband's friend for some time? You are very kind, I make no doubt; but I do not care to be advised by my husband's friends. I prefer my own.'

She spoke with intense insolence, with a mocking accent, and a look of unspeakable bitterness on her face. And as she spoke she rose, as a hint to her visitor to go. Monica rose too.

'I am very sorry, Mrs. St. Claire,' she said. 'I confess I have made a mistake, and that I ought not to have taken this task on myself. But I meant it for your good—for an expression of my own sincere interest in you; and if it seems to you an impertinence, I had only the wish to be useful and friendly.'

'Good-morning,' said Ione. Then suddenly changing her voice and manner, she said with extreme complaisance: 'But perhaps you would like to stay and see my husband? Pray do so, Miss Barrington, if you like. He will be here presently. Will you not wait to see him?'

'Thank you,' said Monica quite quietly. 'I am not ill, and I have nothing to speak to him about. Good-morning, Mrs. St. Claire. Forgive me if I have annoyed you,' she said again, as her last vain endeavour at reparation and peace. 'Try to believe I did not intend to vex you, but quite—quite the contrary.'



Saying which she turned away, with the feeling of one who has aimed high and struck low, and who has made a fatal blunder which nothing now can ever put to rights. And the last thing she saw was Ione's face hardened into scorn and hate and jealous wrath, her proud lip curled and her eyes, now fully opened, with one blazing look of passion turned on her like so much infernal fire.

'Mother was mistaken, and I was weak to yield to her,' said Monica to herself, as she settled herself in the carriage, feeling humiliated, ashamed and sorry, all in one. 'And Mrs. St. Claire was right to be offended. It was an impertinence, when one thinks of it; and she is justified in resenting being treated as a child. What business had I to warn or advise her? She is his wife, and that ought to be enough for us as for her. But I am sorry. I am sorry for her—and oh, how sorry for him!'

And of the two, the latter filled her mind more than the former; and the sorrow she felt for Armine was deeper and sadder than that which she felt for Ione—or even for herself, in that she had blundered and brought bale, not blessing, in her train.

Others beside Monica Barrington took it on themselves to remonstrate; and of these Vincenzo was the most forcible. He was madly jealous of this straight-backed, clean-limbed, broad-shouldered young man—this English cicisbeo—who rode instead of danced, and paid his court in the open air instead of in a boudoir. Of the two he hated Edward more than Armine. The one was of the nature of fate while it lasted, but it was something that death could remove; the other was voluntary and trenched on an available margin. He lost his time. Cousin though he was, this confectioner and local Gull, with her secret in his hand and his blood in her veins, Ione defied his authority and despised his remonstrances. She had no love for the master of Hillside to make her superstitious and timid, as for her husband; and when Vincenzo prophesied disaster to the man who gave her pleasure and gained for her the disfavour of the neighbourhood, she only lifted her chin and said coldly: 'It is nothing to me; Mr. Formby can take care of himself.'

Still she was secretly disturbed, and not quite so sure of the wisdom of her ways as she had been. Had she been let alone, and that dangerous pride of hers not stirred by unskilful handling, Monica's gentle advice and Vincenzo's ruder warnings might have worked together in favour of prudence; and, under the belief that her own better judgment guided her, she would have practically acknowledged the value of that discretion which each had preached; she would not have confessed to influence, but she would have been influenced all the same, while giving her own common sense the credit of her action—as the proud always do when they let themselves be persuaded.

But Jane Wintergreen spoilt the better chance. She met Ione one day face to face, and fired off a small salvo of insolence and warning, which hardened the young wife like another Pharaoh, and cut down to the ground all the gentler growths which had just begun to sprout. And the consequence of the interview was that Ione, from the very haughtiness of opposition, on her next riding excursion four times passed that little house covered with ivy and jessamine, where Miss Wintergreen tyrannised over her maid and took stock of her neighbours; and each time that she passed it she took care to be laughing very hilariously, with her head turned so as to look straight into Edward's face. And when heedless young people do this kind of thing to those who have ill-nature, and the power to use it, what can they expect but hard handling? And Jane Wintergreen's hands were hard when she put out their strength.

Ione had failed to stop the current when she could; and now the waters threatened to overwhelm her; for Jane was virtuous, though also a little venomous, and she made up her mind to speak to Dr. St. Claire himself, and to speak too plainly to be misunderstood. Men at the best were but false gods to her, and flirting was the accursed thing which must not be allowed, come what might.

And like all persons who are going to do ill-natured things, she persuaded herself that it was out of pure charity to that misguided young thing and that her stripes were laid on for reformation, not punishment.

'I say, Dr. St. Claire, look after your wife a little better than you do!' she said abruptly, attacking the question point-blank as her manner was. 'Letting her run about the country with a young man like Edward Formby—though he is one of our own, and we know all about him; which we cannot say of every one—and letting her be closeted for hours with a foreigner in a back-parlour, as she is with that man who makes cakes and sweets of goodness only knows what!—that's not the kind of thing we decent English folk approve of; and so I tell you, doctor, as a friend, frankly.'

'I am sorry if my wife does anything that seems to you undesirable, Miss Wintergreen,' said Dr. St. Claire in his sweet, graceful, but intangible way; a way that made you feel you had no hold on him, and could not really touch him—like a beautiful ice-crystal which melted in your hand, or a mist-wreath on the mountain that dissolved as you came near.

'Undesirable is not quite the word that I should use,' said Jane grimly. 'I should call it something much plainer than that.'

'Yes? But I confess I do not see any harm in Mrs. St. Claire's riding out now and then with my friend Edward Formby as her escort, when I cannot go with her myself.'

Armine spoke with perfect temper and all his best good-breeding.

‘Then it would speak better for your common sense if you did see harm where every one else can see it,’ returned Jane, even more grimly than before. ‘Your very confiding husbands are not to my taste, doctor. We homely English bodies would call them by another name, I tell you. When young women are married they should think of something else beside pleasure. They should mind the house and keep to their own firesides, and not be met scouring the country like fly-by-nights a good twenty miles from home! Such goings on, they are not decent; and you are not the man, doctor, to make Oakhurst take to them.’

‘I am sorry you see things in this harsh light, Miss Wintergreen,’ said Armine.

‘Then if you are, prove it. You have it in your own hands,’ Jane answered sharply.

‘At all events I thank you for your kind intentions,’ he said in his sweet temporising way.

‘Which I wager anything you will not act on,’ returned Jane rudely. ‘We all know who is master in the doctor’s house, and how meek a henpecked husband crows! So good-day to you, doctor, and never say you have not had a good friend in Oakhurst who has put herself out of the way to give you good advice, and keep you and your young lady straight.’

And with this she flung the young man a disdainful kind of nod, and strode on her way rejoicing.

For all his graceful acquiescence of manner and virtual intangibility when with Miss Wintergreen, her words left St. Claire as perplexed and disturbed as she herself would have desired. He knew that he did not love Ione, and that he was but a dull companion for her at the best. He knew, too, that he escaped from her society whenever he could with decency, wearied as he was now with her love, and now with her jealousy; now with her fiery adoration, and now with her consuming wrath. It seemed churlish to deny her a pleasure which was substantially innocent simply because a few narrow-minded and censorious spinsters chose to speak about it. And yet, was he not bound to protect that young wife of his against the very least misunderstandings? Was not the delicate bloom of her repute the most sacred of his possessions, and its preservation the most imperative of his duties? And were not appearances all-important in the world—more especially for one who has to live by the good-will of that world?

He was sorry for her. It was a martyrdom and a misery all throughout. But he must do his duty and leave the rest to take care of itself. He worried himself a good deal during the day, but by the time he reached home in the late afternoon he had

resolved to bring things to an issue, and to ventilate the matter all through. But it was awkward, all things considered;—especially that loan from Edward Formby, which at the time had been such a boon, but which now—how much he wished he had never taken! How strangely his lines had crossed with Edward's! He remembered how, in the beginning of things, he had heard that Edward and Monica were destined for each other; and how, through doubt and fear, he had come to the conviction that the neighbourhood had proposed and the principals themselves had not ratified. It was Edward, too, who had given him that letter of introduction to the Stewarts by which his whole life had been changed—and those old speculations and impossible dreams for Ione, and his wishes that she could have found a home at Hill-side! And now people were beginning to talk of him and Ione; and his money had pulled him, Armine, Ione's husband, through his difficulties. What a strange tangle it was!

'Where did you go to-day, Ione?' Armine asked as he pushed back his chair from the window so that the light should not fall on his face, and spoke with almost more than usual gentleness. It was the instinctive hypocrisy of a gentle nature when an unpleasant duty has to be undertaken.

'To Cross Roads,' said Ione, a shade reluctantly.

'All that distance, dear! Cross Roads is full twenty miles away! That is far too long a ride,' he returned.

'I found it delightful; not at all too long,' she said.

'But these long rides are not good for you. Forty miles—that is excessive!'

'Why are they not good?' she asked with studied indifference.

'They are bad for your health,' he answered.

'That is absurd,' was her reply. 'I was never in such splendid health as I am now. I am as strong as a lioness. If that is your only reason for finding fault with them, Armine, it is nonsense.'

'I may have another,' he said.

'Yes?'

She spoke in the same studiously indifferent way as before. She seemed to wish to make him understand that his disapprobation touched her no more than the idle whistling of the wind.

'It does not look well to see you going so far and so fast,' he said. 'People here do not like it, and have spoken of it to me.'

'You mean Miss Barrington, or perhaps Miss Wintergreen, by your "people here,"' said Ione. 'And you care for what two old maids like these say! Upon my word, Armine, you are incomprehensible!'

The old Palermo scorn came back over her face. Her fine eyes flashed, her thin lips curved, her transparent nostrils dilated.

She was Ione Stewart, fighting fate and defying law, as in the former days; she was no longer the lover of Armine and, to her belief, his beloved.

‘Is there anything incomprehensible in my wishing you to be careful, dear, so that people should have nothing to say against you?’ said Armine, intrenched in the fastnesses of common sense and conventionality.

‘If you had thought for yourself and out of regard for me, I might have attended to you,’ said Ione. ‘As the mouthpiece of Miss Barrington and Miss Wintergreen—grazie tante!’

‘A thing is right or wrong in itself, Ione. It is not who speaks it, but what it is,’ said Armine sagely.

‘Then you need not trouble yourself,’ she answered. ‘There is no more wrong in my riding twenty miles than ten.’

‘Perhaps I should object to the ten,’ said Armine.

‘That you certainly have no right to do,’ she answered quickly. ‘You did not at the first, and you have no right to go back from your word and make new regulations just to please two spiteful old maids. Your Miss Barrington indeed, with her airs of Santa Maria, and that old toad, that Miss Wintergreen! No, Armine; I am not going to have my life regulated by either one or the other!’

‘We will not quarrel about names, dear,’ said Armine, always sweet and gentle, and always wise enough to refuse to take up the glove which she brandished so persistently in his face. ‘It is I myself who object to it; and I have the right, seeing that things have not turned out quite as I expected.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Ione quickly. ‘How have they turned out?’

‘By making people talk,’ Armine answered simply.

‘And you care for that?’ was her scornful commentary.

‘We cannot live without the world’s good-will,’ he said. ‘Certainly you and I cannot, Ione, when our very bread depends on it. We must attend to appearances on the one hand, and to the prejudices among which we live on the other. There is no help for it. So, my dear girl, sorry as I am to say it, you must give up these long rides with Edward Formby, and you must not go out with him so often.’

‘Now you have shown your colours!’ said Ione disdainfully. ‘You confess, then, it is only because of what people say.’

‘It is because of prudence and wisdom,’ he answered.

‘I do not care now,’ said Ione, with a mocking laugh. ‘Your Santa Maria shall have no hand in my life, nor that old zitellone either! Now, Armine, you are answered, and you need say no more.’

‘I am answered, but not convinced nor conquered,’ he said. ‘These rides must be put a stop to. Mr. Formby has good sense,



if you have not. And now that we are talking, there is another thing I have to speak about. I have heard a strange report of your being so often seen in the back parlour of the confectioner's shop. I cannot understand what it all means. But people are talking of that too; and I am all abroad about it.'

'Miss Wintergreen again?' said Ione.

But she rather feigned than felt the disdain she threw into her voice. Her face a little changed, too, in expression, and her eyes had not all the bold candour of opposition that had been in them when she spoke of Edward Formby.

'Never mind whether it was Miss Wintergreen or not,' said Armine impatiently. 'It is enough to know that I was told you have been watched coming out of the back parlour, where you had been for hours. It seems to me so strange to hear such a thing of a girl so proud as you; for all that the man is, I understand, an Italian, and you may like to talk to him in your own language. Still, you to be on familiar terms with a shopkeeper—it is incredible!'

'What wretches you English are!' cried Ione, in strange agitation. 'That odious Miss Wintergreen met me one day coming out of the inner room, where I had been for about five minutes. What a wretch she is—what an old snake and serpent!'

'But what were you doing there, Ione? In England, ladies do not do such things,' said Armine with a kind of fretful dignity.

It was all such a nuisance, such an imbroglio.

'What was I doing? Looking at Vincenzo's dolci,' she said defiantly.

'Who on earth is Vincenzo?'

'That ugly man you hated so much at Palermo—the superintendent of the mill.'

'That ruffian! What is he doing here?' asked Armine, with the feeling of being suddenly confronted by a nameless kind of danger.

'He is the confectioner,' she said.

'But why has he come here—here of all places in the world,' he asked again, seriously disturbed.

'Chi lo sa; I am not in his pocket,' said Ione with a hard laugh. 'Perhaps to look after me and protect me from English brigands.'

'Nonsense, Ione; how can you condescend to talk such rubbish? Why did you not tell me he was here?' said Armine with decided temper.

She turned on him like a lioness at bay.

'And why should I tell you that or anything else, Armine?' she said passionately.

‘Young wives in general do not keep secrets from their husbands,’ he said.

‘Husbands! Husbands! No, not if their husbands care for them,’ she returned. But what do you care for me? Nothing; not half so much as you care for Miss Barrington or Miss anybody else. You neglect me, ill-treat me, deny me every trifle, no matter what it is—even a little pleasure which costs you nothing—you treat me abominably, and then you expect that I am to confide in you, and love you, and obey you, as if you were a god and I a little dog. I will do nothing of the kind, Armine. You are not good to me, and I do not see why I should be good to you. And I will not; so now you know.’

‘My poor Ione,’ said Armine with sudden gentleness. ‘It is hard lines for you, I confess. Debt, poverty, want of society, and misunderstanding—I foresaw it all; and now it has come.’

‘Anything may come if you love me,’ said Ione, with an outburst of old passion.

She went over to where he sat, and threw herself on her knees before him.

‘Tell me that you love me as much as you did, and then I will do anything for you,’ she said. Her arms were round him; her face was upturned to his; her dilated eyes were fixed feverishly on him; her heart was on fire; her blood was like burning flame. ‘I care for nothing in the world, Armine, but you. Tell me that you love me as you used—as you loved me at Palermo.’

‘I love you, dear, as much as I ever loved you, the same here as at Palermo,’ said her husband, kissing her upturned face more sadly perhaps than fervently, more in contrition than for loving need, more to soothe his own conscience than to satisfy his impulse.

A strange spasm convulsed her face.

‘How much was that?’ she said.

‘Silly child; how can you measure love?’ he answered smiling.

‘You do not love me, Armine; you never have loved me,’ she said, not really believing what she said, but with the wish to be reassured and the spirit of one tempting danger.

‘I do not love you when you are silly and doubt me,’ he said, tenderly smoothing back her hair.

‘Do you love me at all?’ she asked, letting herself be soothed.

‘Of course I do,’ he answered with a smile.

‘Swear it.’

‘I swear it,’ he said.

‘Better than anyone else in the whole world, Armine? Swear it by your hope of heaven, by your faith in God!’ said Ione solemnly.

‘Why take such sacred names in vain for a mere play?’ he answered. ‘Let it content you, child, that I love you, that you are my wife, and that I am faithful to you in word and deed.’

‘Who is she?’ cried Ione, starting to her feet. ‘There is some one, Armine—who is it? It is Monica Barrington.’

‘Is it?’ he said with a rather ghastly attempt at playfulness. ‘Just think! if it should be!’

‘If it is I will find it out—and I will kill her,’ said Ione, setting her teeth like a trap.

## CHAPTER XXXIII.

### MAKING FOR THE ROCKS.

LIFE is a terrible problem. What with contradictory duties, ignorance of the right way, the doctrine of a merciful rod on the one hand and of the father of lies coming before us as an angel of light on the other, we are worse off than belated wanderers in a morass, led by will-o’-the-wisps into folly and by hobgoblins into danger. We have chastisements which we are told are blessings in disguise; and our rosiest apples, which seem made for nourishment and delight, turn out to be but Dead Sea fruit, full of bitterness and ashes. It is hard to know how to steer on such a strange phantasmagoric sea; hardest of all to know whom to love and what to leave, or where assent is foolish and where denial is forbidden.

That loan—or gift?—which Edward Formby had made to Armine St. Claire was one of these disappointed contradictions—one of these Dead Sea apples which look like wholesome food and are not fit for man’s consumption. In view of all that had been said to him of late, it had made Armine uncomfortable and uneasy; and in view of his own unconfessed, but none the less existing feeling, it had made Edward Formby also uncomfortable and uneasy. The one asked himself: Had he been bribed? He hated himself for the doubt, but there it was, and he could not get rid of it. If so, what could he do? How should he act? He could not fling back the money into Edward’s face. He had spent it, and he might as well try to move the world without a lever as try to replace it. Duelling was out of fashion, and calm reasoning between man and man was scarcely possible on such a matter. The position was difficult, delicate, dangerous; and the young doctor did not see his way quite clearly. He was only conscious of so much—that something must be done.

On his side Edward Formby asked himself: Had he bought a complaisance which would ruin the whole thing, and turn the sweetest friendship he had ever made into one of the most degrading? He, too, hated himself for the doubt; but self-hatred goes for little against suspicion, and the two young men were at this moment distinctly suspicious of each other. So much was due

to that loan, which to Armine had looked so like an interposition of Providence when it was made, and which Edward had offered in such simplicity of good faith.

Ione, for all that she knew nothing of this money transaction, was yet as uncomfortable as were the men. She was harassed by Vincenzo, revolted by his insinuations which clung like burning pitch when once made, humiliated by his presence, his knowledge, his relationship, and maddened by jealousy of some unknown rival with her husband. He had always denied it, but she was now morally sure that some one stood between her and Armine; though she was unable to say who that some one was. She only knew it in that blind way in which we are conscious of a presence beside our own in the dark room where we are shut up. She could not see nor touch; but she knew. She knew also that Edward Formby loved her, and that she could deal with him as she would—make him her husband's scourge and her own avenger if the humour took her or the times were ripe. If she did, she knew also that in the background was always Vincenzo with whom she would have to reckon—Vincenzo, her evil genius incarnate, visiting on her the sins of her parents according to the law. Be that as it would, she held the master of Hillside as a force in reserve—as the Nemesis whom she could command, should the day ever dawn when she must avenge herself on her love. But because she was torn and distracted with doubt and jealousy—with ignorance of how much she had to revenge, and desire to pay back that which was owing, could she but find out what it was—she was uncertain and fitful in her conduct to Edward;—now maddening in her allurements and now as maddening in her repulsion. At times she would not ride with him, would scarcely speak to him, would not look at him, turned from him as if with loathing; then she was like an angel for sweetness and a demon for seductiveness; while Edward, afraid to believe and scarce able to doubt, asked himself, What it all meant? and never came to the true answer. Once or twice he thought that he himself was the cause of all this uncertainty—that she loved him and fought against her passion, but was not always able to conquer—when the burden of the 'barren honour' that must be preserved rested on him. And, heavy as it was, for her sake it must be borne. He was not singular in thinking himself the cause when he was only the occasion. This too is among those will-o'-the-wisps by which men are led astray in life and judgment.

Ione was as uncertain in her temper to Armine as she was to Edward. And yet it could scarcely be called uncertainty so much as change and difference. She was cold to him as only those can be whose hearts are burning while their lips are frozen. Days passed, during which she never proffered him a caress, never laid her hand in his, never called him by an endearing epithet, and

indeed scarcely spoke to him at all. Yet during this time of frost and snow he used to see her eyes fixed on him with a look that seemed to strike like a whip—a look of passion and reproach and love and sorrow and latent hate all mingled in one, like the litany of her wrongs written in letters of fire.

Then he would take himself to task and resolve on better things. He would be a more attentive companion, a more finished courtier than he had been, to the woman whose only fault towards him was the intensity of her love. All the rest was the mere outgrowth from this central fact, and in justice could not count in the indictment which weariness and want of sympathy made against her. He would conquer his personal shrinking from her, and see her as he saw her at Palermo—beautiful, unfortunate, a living appeal to his compassion, an imperative claim on his admiration. He would shut his eyes to all that was antagonistic to his taste, and accept, as if he liked them, those fervid demonstrations which chilled and embarrassed rather than warmed and rejoiced him. Checked now, he believed that, at a sign from him, those fervid demonstrations would break out as warmly as before. It all rested with him. Man-like, he could not doubt his supreme power over the woman who loved him. He had only to beckon with his fore-finger and Ione would come back to her devotion, as a well-trained hawk to her lure. He was master of the situation all round; and those borderlands of feeling where opposites mix and mingle did not exist for him. Love was love to him. He could not understand the state of mind where love transfused with jealousy becomes hate.

His task of lover-like courtiership was difficult. Marriage, which takes off the edge of romance, sharpens that of uncongeniality; and daily contact deepens the cross-hatching of discord. Pinching shoes must be worn long before they are worn easy; and Armine had not yet trodden his into fitting shape. Nevertheless he would do his best. He would turn over a new leaf, and make himself uncomfortable that he might make her happy.

‘I am not busy this afternoon, will you come for a walk with me?’ he asked at luncheon one day, after they had been sitting for some time in silence, Ione, with her mind full of other things and her feet on the edge of an abyss, not seeing and not caring for the disorder of the table and the unappetising condition of the food which revolted Armine, whose health was too impaired and whose tastes were too refined to bear well with either coarseness in food or disorder in service.

His offer took Ione by surprise. For a moment her strange eyes flashed with pleasure, and a smile broke over her face as a ripple breaks over a sullen mountain tarn. It was only for a moment. Her griefs against her husband were too deep and many to be lost at his first movement towards her.



‘Thank you,’ she said unpleasantly; ‘but I am going to the flower-show to-day.’

‘Oh, I forgot!’ returned Armine with a forced smile. ‘Of course; the flower-show. We will go there instead.’

‘Together?’ she asked with a mocking accent.

‘Surely!’

‘Really it will be quite odd to go anywhere with you, Armine!’ she said, in the same unpleasant and mocking way. ‘It will be so strange, it will feel almost improper!’

‘Little goose!’ said Armine, he also with the same forced smile as before.

Ione drew her lips into their thin well-known line, and lowered her eyelids till only a glittering thread was seen between the lashes. Jealous and suspicious, she scented the danger of foreign influence, and did not believe in the integrity of her husband’s conversion.

‘Who has been speaking to you, Armine?’ she asked.

‘About what?’

‘About me.’

‘About you? No one.’

‘Not of your disgraceful neglect of me?’ she asked.

‘As I do not neglect you, no one could take me to task,’ he answered very quietly.

She laughed scornfully.

‘Not neglect me!’ she said. ‘I do not know a husband in the whole world who treats his wife as badly as you treat me—who neglects her so entirely. If you say that you do not, you will say anything!’

‘Asking you to come to the flower-show is a proof of it, is it not?’ he answered, offering the olive-branch in his pleasant, sweet, caressing voice.

‘It is a proof that some one has been remonstrating with you, and that you are influenced by some woman whose good opinion you value, not by any care for me!’ blazed out Ione.

‘Be it so,’ said Armine, a little wearily.

To undertake a combat, as well as to fulfil a *corvée*, was beyond his strength.

‘Up to now, Armine, I have believed you at least sincere,’ said Ione, speaking in the low voice and with the artificial deliberation of strong excitement. ‘Now I see that you are a hypocrite as well as other things.’

‘In that case I need say no more,’ said Armine, rising from the table. ‘If it pleases you, Ione, to think ill of me, I shall not attempt to disturb your enjoyment. You will come to a better frame of mind by-and-by. And I can afford to wait.’

He turned to go, but she put herself between him and the door.

‘What have I done to you, Armine, that you should behave to me as you do?’ she cried, seizing his wrists. ‘I have loved you as few girls love even the best and greatest man. I have given up everything for your sake—home and money and happiness and station—all for you. And what has been my reward? Neglect and ill-treatment! You throw me into the way of a man like Mr. Formby, simply that I may go wrong, and then you will get rid of me. You deprive me of every pleasure. You grudge me common necessities—and all for what? What have I done? How have I deserved it?’

Her voice, which had begun in a low key, had gradually risen into a kind of shriek. Her eyes, which had been fierce and hard, were now still fierce, but wild rather than hard. Her passions were rising, as the storm and the tempest rise in the sky and break over the land. She was losing her self-control. In a few moments that and her beauty and her dignity would have gone like flowers on the sand swept away by the tide.

Armine stood there passively waiting for the flood—and then the ebb; while she gripped his wrists with her nervous hands—her fingers closing like steel over his flesh, and her eyes flaming in his face.

‘You are mad, Ione,’ he said, with that kind of contempt which innocence puts on when wrongfully accused. ‘You take the preoccupations of a profession like mine for neglect, and our common poverty for grudging. I told you at Palermo what you were coming into, and that you would be both poor and lonely. As for your shameful words about Mr. Formby,’ he went on to say, speaking slowly and impressively; ‘if I did not take them as the mere ravings of an ungoverned temper—if I thought that you believed in them—I should act on them now this moment, and now and for ever break off all intercourse with him, even to the slightest acquaintance. You make me regret, Ione, that I ever allowed those rides which have borne bad fruit in more ways than one.’

‘You allowed?’ said Ione with supreme disdain.

‘Has your husband no rights over your conduct?’ he asked.

‘No,’ she answered; ‘I am my own mistress!’

‘And my wife,’ he said firmly.

‘Which does not mean your slave,’ she retorted.

‘Which means that I am master, Ione.’

‘Mine?’ she said, gripping his wrists unconsciously. ‘No! never!’

‘We shall see when the time comes,’ he returned. ‘But now the question is, are you coming to the flower-show with me or not?’

‘Who has told you to ask me?’ was her reply. ‘You have not done so of your own free-will. Who has made you, Armine?’

He shrugged his shoulders in his French way.

‘You are too absurd!’ he answered.

‘But is it not so, Armine?’ she asked again, her voice a little rounder, her manner a little less insulting, her eyes a trifle softer, and her nervous hands slipping from his wrists nearer to his palms.

‘No,’ he answered curtly.

‘And you have asked me of your own free-will—no one influencing you?’

‘How often must I say Yes?’ he answered. ‘Who should influence me, Ione? Who on earth would or could interfere between man and wife in this way, or induce me to do so small a thing as this?’

‘Chi lo sa!’ she answered. ‘Perhaps Miss Barrington!’

Armine’s pale face flushed. With an angry gesture he tore his hands from her and turned away.

‘You are really too ridiculous to argue with!’ he said. ‘I have not seen Miss Barrington. How should she have influenced me?’

A breath as of flame shot across Ione’s face. Her nostrils dilated, and over her whole being came the strange crouching, penetrating expression of a creature who has found the secret—who has struck the trail. But then she had looked like this before when she had blazed out into jealous wrath and base suspicions about this farmer’s wife or that cottager’s daughter—about Miss Flora Farley or Miss Rose Chesson—about any and every one who claimed her husband’s care and stood between her and her autocratic desire of sole possession.

‘Her name disturbs you very much,’ she said slowly.

‘Who would not be disturbed with a wife as insane as you?’ he returned angrily. ‘Your jealousy, Ione, is beyond endurance. It respects no one. You would be jealous of an angel from heaven!’

‘No; I am only jealous of a woman on earth,’ said Ione, in the same slow way as before; ‘especially of a woman who is too sacred to be spoken of, like this Miss Barrington, for instance.’

‘Are you going to the flower-show or not?’ said Armine, suddenly changing front. ‘Because if you are you had better be thinking of it. I shall have to leave you later in the afternoon.’

‘You are very anxious about the flower-show, Armine,’ she said with a sneer. ‘Whom are you to meet there?’

‘I suppose all Oakhurst,’ he answered with studied indifference.

‘Miss Barrington?’

‘Probably; and Mrs. Anthony, and Miss Chesson, and every one.’

‘If I were sure that Mr. Formby would be there I would go,’ she said, casting her fire in his face.

‘Probably he will,’ was the answer made, quite quietly.

‘He is always so kind, so chivalrous, so gentle, and so strong,’ said Ione, holding up her head. ‘If you think he will be there, Armine, I will go.’

Her husband looked at her with a sudden flash of angry contempt, but he held back his speech. He would not give her the victory she desired.

‘Are you coming or not?’ he repeated.

‘To meet Mr. Formby? Yes, I think I will,’ she said with an insulting laugh.

‘No,’ said Armine, holding her back as she was passing him; ‘to go with me, Ione, not to meet Mr. Formby.’

‘You are going to meet Miss Barrington,’ was her rejoinder. ‘We shall be only quits.’

‘In that case we had better stay away altogether,’ said Armine.

‘You may do as you like,’ she said. ‘I am going, with or without you. It does not signify to me whether you accompany me or not. I am going for my own pleasure, not yours. Do you understand?’

And with this she thrust him aside, with an action which was essentially a blow, as she went upstairs to dress for the local fête.

Armine sat down by the table and laid his face on his crossed arms, like a man weary with the fight. Scenes of all kinds were abhorrent to him—as abhorrent as every sort of violence, of exaggeration, of excess. Between Ione’s fervid love and frantic jealousy, her wild caresses and wilder wrath, he felt that all the peace and sweetness, all the delight and dignity of life were lost. His only sense of rest was when she was sullen and moody, as she had been of late; and this was but the lull before the storm. Truly the chain and bullet of his servitude weighed heavily on him, and he could neither lighten the weight nor free himself from the fetter. He knew that Ione had what is called a stronger character than he—that is, she had a more determined will, a more resolute way. He was too peace-loving to be wilful, too sensitive to be resolute. He would give in for the sake of peace, also not to hurt another; but she would strive to the end and get her will, if she had to slay her love in the process.

Wearily thinking of the whole bitter mistake of his life, wishing that the end was near and that, without cowardice, he could pass through the gate which gives no backward swing, he sat there as in a dream of pain, when Ione returned, dressed and ready. Her heart was touched when she saw him in this attitude of speechless misery. She thought it was because of her—her cruelty and wickedness. And, because she was still in love, her victory and its results made her tender and repentant.

She went up to him softly and laid her hand on his shoulder.

‘What is the matter? Are you ill, Armine?’ she said, stooping so that her cheek touched his.

He started and looked up. His face looked ill enough, haggard and white as it was, and with those mournful eyes, dry and fixed, where it would have been less pathetic to have seen tears.

In a moment her arms were round him, and she held him to her breast.

‘My darling, my darling,’ she said passionately; ‘do not mind what I said, I was angry. I do not know what I did say; but I love you, Armine—you know that I do—you, only you. Darling, my beloved, you are all my life to me.’

She covered his pale face with kisses—brow, lips, and cheeks, those mournful eyes, the very curls on his head—she kissed them all; her lips like fire, her strong young arms clasping him to her heart, her imperious personality enveloping and overpowering him, her love surging like a sea in her soul and breaking like a storm in her caresses.

A shiver passed over Armine. It was peace he wanted, not passion; the gentle harmonies of affection, not these tropical outbursts, now of demoniacal fury and now of delirious love—outbursts wherein was no sense of peace, no form of dignity.

‘I know, I know, my dear,’ he said gently. ‘And I dare say you are often sorely tried, poor girl,’ he added, with a tender kind of sigh. ‘But I never mean to make you unhappy, Ione.’

‘You are an angel!’ said Ione with passion. ‘I love you! I love you! You do not know how much I love you, Armine!’ she added, kissing his throat. ‘Some day you will.’

‘When you have killed me?’ he said with a sad little smile.

‘When I have died for you,’ she answered fervently.

## CHAPTER XXXIV.

### AT THE FLOWER-SHOW.

It was the last flower-show of the year at Oakhurst, and every one made it a point of honour to go, while all who could sent something to help in the general display. The ground was crowded with people and the tents were filled with produce. The great people contributed their hothouse grapes and peaches, their pines and melons; the farmers sent turnips and potatoes, beets and monster ears of corn; and a special plank was set apart for nosegays of leaves and grasses, berries and late autumn flowers, by which the cottage children were to be taught perception of colour and form. So that the whole thing was arranged with as much perfection as could be compassed in a place like Oakhurst,



where the magnates could be counted on the fingers and the groundlings were as the hairs of the head in comparison. There was a band of music too, of rather wild notions in the way of time and tune; and there was a Punch-and-Judy show for the little ones; and some of the toilettes were things to behold and wonder at—the satisfaction of the wearers being always exactly proportioned to the extravagance thereof—so that Oakhurst was altogether having a good time, and enjoying itself to the n<sup>th</sup>.

In the madness of her late moody displeasure against her husband, Ione had written to Edward Formby, appointing a time and place where to meet him at the show. She cared nothing for the consequences. If by trailing his name and her own self-respect through the mire she could provoke Armine, pain him, sting him, agonise him, she would, no matter what the end might be. Young as she was, she knew the peril in which she had voluntarily placed herself and how she was emphatically playing with fire. She was conscious how her safety lay in Edward's regard for her purity, and how, when she ceased to respect herself, all the rest would go by the board. But this was as chaff before the wind in the fever of her wrath; and she counted the shame of her self-degradation a mere nothing if by that she could revenge herself on her husband.

Now, however, when this fervid reconciliation had edged out her former bitterness, Edward was of no more importance to her than so much thistledown in the air. She was well with her husband, the man whom she loved; and all the rest was valueless.

Radiantly beautiful; dressed in her favourite colours of old-gold and cream; queenly, proud, elated, superb, and cruel to the discarded as the loving ever are when reconciled to the beloved, Ione passed through the gate, with Armine by her side, and went straight to the central tent, where she knew that Edward Formby must have been waiting for her for at least half an hour. He had been waiting for more than that time. For a full hour, his impatience going before the clock, the master of Hillside had been standing sentinel among the dahlias and china-asters, afraid to stir, lest Ione should come in at one entrance while he went out at another. In which case he should certainly lose five good minutes of her society. And five minutes taken from the contemplation of Ione's face were as five ages to Edward Formby, her husband's friend and benefactor.

Up to this day he had meant no harm by this devotion to another man's wife. Such things can be with men of his character. He was one of those honest unconscious souls who live only in the present and blink, owl-eyed, at the future; striding down the decline which leads to Avernus without knowing that they have left the level path. He meant no harm and he foresaw no danger—because he foresaw nothing of any kind. He only knew that

the hours spent with Ione St. Claire were hours of unalloyed happiness; that to-day was blessed and to-morrow had to come.

She had brought a new sensation into his life and had led him through a new experience. The seductions of those Birds whose home is in the Wood he knew; the sincere and passionless affection of a brother for a sister, in his relations with Monica, that also he knew; but this deep and tremulous passion, at once respectful and absorbing—this love which exalted womanhood into something sacred, and protected his ideal from his own desire—this chivalrous devotion which asked only to serve and did not seek to be rewarded—which was content to pay its homage in the daylight, and to hide away its hope for the dreams of the night—this was new to him; and, like a boy, he cherished his secret treasure without asking himself whether it were lawfully his or no.

He never asked himself anything about Ione. He trusted the future ordering of things to chance and the instincts of an English gentleman. These had stood him in good stead hitherto, why not now? And yet, since that loan, in spite of himself his thoughts had travelled into a new path, and his relations with the St. Claires seemed somehow changed. His obligations to Armine were fewer; the right to serve Ione was stronger and closer.

People had heard about this loan. Made by cheque, as it had been, it was sure to creep out in a country-place where secrets are public property and the most astounding fictions are those which are based on facts. And, of course, having leaked out as it had, this friendly little transaction, which had been made in such thorough kindness and good faith, had put on an appearance as far removed from the truth as if the gossips had granted horns to a lion and hoofs to a dove. It was assumed to have been an infamy. Talk to them of kindness pure and simple between man and man, and a loan made without consideration of interest and no chance of repayment—were we in Arcadia? No one out of romances does such a thing as this; and Edward Formby was not an Arcadian, nor was Dr. St. Claire the hero of a romance! Wherefore, there must be more here than met the eyes; and that more was necessarily bad.

So they argued, as ignorant suspicion argues all the world over; and when Ione and her husband came into the tent where Edward Formby had been standing sentinel among the dahlias and china-asters for a good hour by the clock—standing with that unmistakable look of watching on his face which shows expectancy and gives leave to presuppose an assignation—a small crowd gathered round to note how things would go.

‘Look at her, that young hussy, that young fly-by-night!’ said Miss Jane Wintergreen, in rather loud tones, as Ione entered the tent, like some queen clad and crowned with gold. ‘Our

Mr. Formby has been waiting for her. I'll wager my head they had an assignation.'

But her fidus Achates, Rachel Major, to whom she spoke, besought her in a terrified whisper to lower her voice, in the first place, and, in the next, not to think evil of a neighbour—for she was as sure as sure that their Mr. Formby could not be so wicked. A married woman!—whatever should he want with waiting for a married woman!

'Devilry,' said Jane emphatically.

On which Rachel said, with quivering fidelity: 'If I were to be torn to pieces by wild horses, Jane, I'll never be made to believe that!'

Still, even she could not help seeing that Edward's face changed unmistakably when the two entered and he went forward to meet them. The truth was he had expected Ione to come alone, and he had not reckoned on Armine; and just at this moment—handsome, interesting, charming as Armine was, he would rather have seen the foul fiend than him.

The turbulent scene through which she had just passed had left its mark on Ione. Electric and alive at all points, she had more than ever of that strange power which made her all men's desire and almost all women's aversion. Insolent and superb, she looked as if she despised and defied the whole world, and trod under foot both their friendship and their enmity. Even Edward, who was to have been her avenger, was now no more to her than a discarded serf; and the knowledge of how she had played on him for her own use—now tossing him a grace and now snatching from him a hope—helped the proud antagonism to all life and humanity which possessed her at this moment. Mistress of herself and fate, she stood as a queen, supreme in beauty, in command, in power; and, hated or loved, all had to confess that she was for the time the pinnacle and apex of social interest in Oakhurst.

But if she stood there as a queen, it was as a queen smitten with leprosy. Clad in her royal robes, crowned with her golden diadem, bearing her sceptre in her right hand, hung round with the glittering insignia of her state, as it might be, she was nevertheless shunned by all. The watching crowd watched still, but gradually edged away, leaving a clear space for her, Edward Formby, and Armine. The two men were evidently embarrassed one with the other, though they made efforts to appear quite friendly and at ease; while Ione, between the two, was insolent to the one because satisfied with the other. Her bird had come back to her hand, not she to her lure; and the whole wide world was concentrated in Armine and her love.

While they were standing there talking by themselves, Monica and Theodosia came into the tent by a side opening.

'Those shameless people!' said Theodosia angrily. She too had heard of that loan, and her interpretation had run on all fours with Jane Wintergreen's. 'Monica, you surely are not going to speak to them in a public place like this!' she added, as she saw her sister-in-law with a kind smile on her face turn towards them as if intending to join them.

'Why not?' asked Monica.

'After all that has been said?—Impossible!' said Theo.

'I know nothing that should prevent my speaking to Mrs. St. Claire—and her husband,' retorted Monica gently.

'That creature standing there and making eyes at Edward Formby; and her husband, who has been bought over, looking on! Monica, have you no sense of dignity or propriety?'

'I do not think I am wanting in either because I speak to friends, against whom neither you nor I know anything, Theo. What we hear is another matter. I for one do not believe all I hear.'

Her gentle persistence, very mild in manner and quite immovable in substance, seemed to irritate Theodosia more than a more passionate opposition would have done.

'If you do go and speak to them I shall think you are bewitched—or worse; as bad as she is, or so infatuated about him that you do not care what you do so long as you may be near him,' said Theodosia in angry whisper. 'See! not a person in the place is speaking to them. Look at the Lanes and the Martyns and the Waltons—no one takes the least notice of them—not even their own set, the Chessons and the Farleys. They are cut publicly, and I do not wonder at it. Monica, you shall not go—I declare I will go up to them and tell them what I think, if you do!'

'If they are cut as you say, Theo, that is all the more reason why I should go,' said Monica, quite gently but very firmly; 'and why you should come too, Theo.'

'I? No! not I!' answered Theo bitterly. 'I have too much respect for your brother's name, Monica, to degrade it in this way. I remember what I owe to him and myself rather better than you do.'

'I respect both my brother and my name best when I do what is right and do not do what is wrong,' rejoined Monica. 'And it is wrong to go with the crowd in this undeserved slight on innocent people. So I shall go and speak to them.'

And with this she made her way through the ranks and stands of flowers and fruit, and walked quietly to where the three stood by the dahlias and the china-asters.

Armene had the professional man's habitual self-command and facial control; but he could not so entirely govern himself as not to show more than the mere conventional politeness of an ordinary

acquaintance, when he saw, coming up to them alone, with so much sweet and gentle friendliness, the only woman whom he had ever loved, and who represented to him all that was most desirable in womanhood and most delightful in humanity. Something came into his face which flashed back a lurid light on Ione's, and, for the second time to-day, she had that strange look of a creature that has found the scent and hit the trail.

Why should Monica come up to them in this marked manner, while Mrs. Anthony stood apart, her vivacious little face aflame and her sparkling black eyes so full of malice and disdain? And why should Armine look as he did? He said nothing, truly, and he did nothing that might not have been said and done by any one in the place, without calling forth remark or betraying intention. Still, he looked; and the eyes are traitors where all the rest of the features keep counsel. Yes; it was Monica Barrington who stood between her and her beloved. It was Monica whom Armine loved; and Monica loved him. It came before her with the flash of a sudden illumination. Fool that she had been not to have seen it before! But the punishment was ready, and the whip of scorpions was lying close to her hand.

It was a painful moment for all concerned, save Monica; and she, the unconscious pivot on which everything was turning, was full only of kindness for each—believing in Edward's integrity, and wishing to prove that she did; pitying Ione's isolation and false position, and therefore desirous to pay her publicly as much attention as she would have paid to any other person of her own degree; and full of sorrow for Armine—to whom, however, she wanted to show only the ordinary courtesy of ordinary friendship, not confessing that any cause for special sympathy existed at all. But though it be an angel's wing which fans the fire, the powder magazine will be reached at last; and the song of a seraph can bring down an avalanche all the same as the cry of a boor. And the suspicion of a jealous woman is as the fire burning close to the powder magazine, and the avalanche trembling on the mountain-side.

After she had watched her husband for some time, and read in his face more than it revealed, Ione turned abruptly to Edward Formby, still standing there doing his best to strangle his disappointment and accept the situation with serenity, but not succeeding quite to his satisfaction.

'Will you come with me to the other tents?' she said hardily, flashing the full light of her glorious eyes on him and smiling with studied sweetness as she spoke. Her smile was forced; the brilliancy of her eyes was artificial and made up; the allurements which she threw into her face was a mere trick of the muscles; her voice, never musical, was deeper and more dissonant than usual; and her nervous hands played restlessly with the handle of



her parasol. Edward Formby saw none of all these signs of a mind ill at ease, and a woman's grace to one man masking a woman's torture because of another. He was simply delighted that she had asked him to go with her. It was in some sort a salve for his mortification.

'What is there to see?' asked Armine, to include himself.

'Some very charming wild-flower bouquets in one, and some really fine fruit in the other,' said Monica, looking at Ione, who, still smiling boldly into Edward's face, did not look back at her.

'Yes, let us go,' said Edward, partly dense and partly charmed.

Armine was cautious of rocks ahead and dangers of which he had to beware. Ione's strange vibration of manner; the patent coldness and something worse of the crowd; Monica's evident desire to be more than ordinarily kind and to throw the ægis of her name and repute about them in their isolation; Edward Formby's embarrassment; the consciousness of his own indebtedness, and now, the growing fear of the motives which had made his friend so generous—not Ione's sudden illumination, brought more pain to her than his thoughts brought to him, as he smiled with the forced smile of society and good-breeding, and made believe that nothing ailed him nor his.

The four gathered into a little knot and turned to leave the tent; and the crowd fell back as they passed, as if they were indeed smitten with leprosy. Even Monica's saintly repute did not protect her from blame in associating herself thus publicly with the discarded of the day, and all either looked askance or turned aside altogether to avoid them. Only Rachel Major came timidly forward, and for the first time in her life offered her hand to the master of Hillside. It was her poor little faithful protest, and her brave act of adhesion and advocacy.

'I was so sorry, Mr. Formby, to keep you waiting!' said Ione as they turned away.

She had pointedly and resolutely separated herself from her husband and Monica. She would not let Monica walk with her, as this last had wished and endeavoured to do, but had taken Edward Formby to herself, while consigning her husband to Miss Barrington in that unmistakable way which includes a contest if it be not accepted.

An apology from Ione was one of those strange variations in the main theme of a character for which no one is prepared—one of those variations which break up the most compact theories and demand a new alphabet for the book of the soul.

'You are very good,' said Edward, a troubled kind of radiance in his eyes. 'I began to fear you were not coming.'

'After I had promised you?' she said with flattering reproach. 'That was not like me!' After a pause, as if to better emphasise

her words, she added: 'Nor what I should have done to you at any time!'

'I am glad to hear that,' he said, his voice a little unsteady. 'I did not think you would have ever done anything special for me.'

'No?' She turned her eyes on him with one of her strange flashing looks—turning so that Armine and Monica should see her face. 'How little you know me!' she said; and then, with the same flattering accent of reproach, she added: 'I thought you understood me better than this, by now!'

'Sometimes I think I do; and then something happens and I am all abroad again,' said Edward in his literal straightforward way.

'You are certainly very much abroad if you doubt my—how shall I call it?—my affection for you,' said Ione boldly.

'Have I really a place in your affections?' asked Edward in a low voice, pretending to examine some fruit which he did not see, and steadying himself against the bench as he spoke.

She glanced back at her husband. He was talking to Monica Barrington and not looking at the show.

'A place?' she asked. 'What would you say if I told you—all?'

'That I love you—better than my life,' he answered.

His large hand trembled like a girl's, his handsome ruddy face was illumined with a sudden glory like a god's—but a god suppliant for all his power, subdued for all his strength. 'Do you love me, Ione?—can you?' he asked.

His voice and words sobered her. She was using him for her revenge, not for her pleasure—indifferent whether she made him suffer or not, so long as she could make him the scourge for her griefs.

'No,' she said, taking herself back like a bow suddenly relaxed. 'I do not love you, Mr. Formby; I love *him*.'

For a second time she turned and looked at her husband; and, as she looked, Monica struck her foot against one of the supports of the benches and slightly sprained her ankle.

There was no cry, no exclamation on either side, as Armine sprang forward to help her; there was only one rapid look passing like light between them;—one brief word from him to her; a gentle little smile of gratitude from her to him. But it was enough. That look burnt into Ione's brain, and for the moment she did not know where she was, nor what had happened, nor what was going to happen. All that she was conscious of was that she was in a storm—it seemed to her a storm of the elements. The throbbing pulses beating in her ears were like the waves of the sea dashing against the sides of the tent—the fiery stream of hate and anguish and passion and jealousy traversing her brain.

and flashing in her eyes was like lightning darting through the skies—the dark sense of infinite despair was like some dreadful eclipse, where the sun was blotted out and all nature was dead. She was recalled to herself by hearing her name spoken in Italian, as Vincenzo stood bareheaded before her. He was her Thought taken shape and form—he should be her avenger on the one side; and on the other—was not Edward there as her own translated Revenge?

The rich scents of the fruit heaped up on the benches were stimulating and intoxicating. The wide nostrils of Vincenzo seemed to draw them in like food, like wine—or as a wild beast draws in the scent of blood. His glittering eyes were full of fire; his face was instinct with that passionate sense of life which is so near to cruelty; and yet, as he stood there bareheaded, he smiled and was good-natured and careless and complaisant, according to his race and nation; ready for a smile, a caress, or a crime, as it might chance—a mafiose for the one part, a devoted friend for the other, a lover to the death, and an enemy as intense as a lover.

No one knew what he said to Ione, and no one knew what she answered back to him. They spoke in Sicilian, and their speech isolated them. But she did not say what he, knowing all, had expected her to say. She did not order him to kill those two who loved each other to her shame and hurt. Still, he said to himself: ‘It will come. She will come to me at last, and I shall hold her in my hand as she held the dead bird at the mill.’

‘Shall we go into the open air?’ asked Monica, who had turned deadly white. ‘I find this tent so stifling, and my ankle hurts me a little. Will you give me your arm, Edward?’

Ione turned from her rudely.

‘No, stay with me, Mr. Formby,’ she said imperiously. ‘I think I shall call you Edward, like all the rest,’ she added, with a harsh laugh.

‘Do,’ returned Edward, who indeed could say no less.

‘My husband can take Miss Barrington,’ continued Ione, with an evil smile and a mocking accent as she said these words ‘my husband,’ once the dearest of all to her, now the most painful. ‘Armine, take Miss Barrington,’ she went on to say, not looking at him and speaking with intense insolence. ‘I will stay here.’

‘I will certainly take Miss Barrington,’ said Armine, offering his arm to Monica, who took it because she was no longer able to stand alone; ‘but I wish you to come too, Ione. This tent is too close for you.’

‘I intend to stay here,’ said Ione. ‘You are happier without me and I am happier without you. Go,’ she said angrily. ‘Do you want me to make a scene, Armine, and turn you out of the tent by force?’

Monica looked at Ione as she might have looked at something

strange and changed. That pale face, those burning eyes, those quivering nostrils, that cruel mouth, this infinite insolence and unrestrained anger—what did it mean, with Vincenzo standing there bareheaded, smiling, looking from each to each with glittering eyes and wide flat nostrils, drinking in the heavy scents of the fruits like wine or blood?

She turned to Armine, and her old love came back on her heart, like a flood breaking through the crust of self-control and the barrier of circumstances; but it came back as pity, not passion; as sorrow for him, not disappointment for herself; as infinite and endless and fruitless sympathy with suffering she could not soothe, and must not even confess that she knew. And then, overpowered by all these influences—by moral pain and physical suffering, her blood chilled by fear and horror of what she saw, and her senses sickened by the heavy scents of the fruits—she swayed forward, and was caught fainting in Armine's arms.

'No,' said Ione, laying her hand on Edward's arm as he stooped to help Armine in carrying Monica to the outer air. 'Stay here with me. Vincenzo, take the Signorina outside. Armine has deserted me for her,' she continued to Edward. 'It is only fair you should remain with me.'

'Let us all go,' said Edward, in profound agitation.

'If you do, never speak to me again!' said Ione in a low voice. 'Stay with me now and I am yours—leave me, and—Buona notte. Those two love each other—let them go. And we will keep together.'

'For ever!' said Edward Formby, feeling as if he had killed a child, and conscious that the instincts of an English gentleman, to which he had trusted, had deserted him in the hour of need.

'To-morrow,' said Ione, giving him her hand.

She shuddered as she spoke, but she did not take back her fatal word. On the contrary, she repeated it, not looking into his face.

'To-morrow. Take me from Oakhurst and all it holds, for ever—for ever!'

'Now?' he said feverishly.

'No; to-morrow,' she returned.

She wanted the interval to gloat over her coming revenge. To strike so swiftly would be merciful; and she had no mercy in her heart—only cruelty, and that self-torturing desire to torture which springs from jealousy and vitiated love.

## CHAPTER XXXV.

## IN HER MADNESS.

THE dinner had passed in unbroken silence. Armine had the feeling of a man who is battling for dear life against fearful odds, and Ione was still dangerous and disturbed. Certainly she had made a slight return on herself, which might grow into repentance or might come to nothing. Of her own free grace she had looked back on the better way she was leaving, and it was just possible that, the angel of her soul conquering the demon now possessing it, Edward Formby would be once more thrown over, and her whip of scorpions laid aside. But also it was just as possible that she would go on just as she had begun, and punish her husband by degrading herself and besmirching Monica Barrington's repute.

For all the world should know the reason why she had left Armine, she said to herself. She would not be the only one to suffer—he and that serpent should suffer with her; and in the shipwreck that had to come they should all go to the bottom together. Still, there was a certain renovation, a certain reinfusion of love for this man whom she was planning to destroy, which was acting as a slight anodyne to her jealous wrath and disposing her to better things.

Words were dead between them, but Ione's eyes took up the tale, and her brief glances were sometimes full of the old eager love; sometimes soft with a woman's desire for pardon and reconciliation; though again dark with her new-born hate, and small and green and glittering as a snake's with her jealous fears. Of those two sitting dumbly there, it was hard to say which was the more miserable, the more oppressed; for, granting all the initiative of evil to lie with jealousy—granting that it is this jealousy alone which causes the pain—that result of pain is equally divided, and 'what they inflict they feel' is only too true a word!

Still wearing her old-gold coloured dress, still electric and alive at all points, Ione was looking supremely lovely; but her beauty had ceased to attract Armine. He scarcely now recognised even its artistic value, associated as it was with so much moral suffering and discord. His had lost none of its power over her. And how handsome he was to-night, with that dead-white skin and curling raven hair, and those large soft eyes, with their sweeping lashes like a girl's, and that strange look of stillness and determination on his face! He was like a god in pain for wilful



humanity; his divinity untouched for all his pain—sorrowful and desolate in one. How beautiful he was! how good and sweet and gentle! and, in spite of all her wrath and madness, how passionately she loved him! But no other woman should love him! She held him—she possessed him; he was hers, hers only; and rather than let another share even in her love for him, she would——

Again she thought of Vincenzo, a mafiose, her cousin, the man who loved her and who for love would do her will. It was well to have such devotion at her back! She might need it; who knows?

The dinner was of a better character to-day than usual. For his own pleasure Vincenzo had supplied it as his gift, and it had quite a holiday air. It was the completion of the festa according to him; and it pleased him to think that Ione ate well to-day at his expense. But it dragged; and for all its delicacy Armine scarcely ate at all. He had no appetite, he was suffering in body as well as in mind. The first fogs and damps of autumn had found him out, and his chest was aching as it had ached last year, before that fatal illness which had necessitated that still more fatal voyage to Palermo.

A fire was burning in the grate, and the red glow of the flame mingled with the whiter shine of the lamp and made the shabby room look radiant.

The dinner was over and had been removed; only the dessert was left. Grapes and peaches and heavy scented melons, wine and hothouse flowers from Hillside, with luscious sweets of various kinds from Vincenzo, made a table elegant to luxuriousness; and as the moments flew by, the young wife felt herself carried farther and farther from her wicked outbreak, and nearer to the blessed peace of loving reconciliation. If only Armine would look at her!—if only he would not keep his eyes so resolutely from her face!

The glowing flame of the fire leaped high in the grate, and struck the glass on the table with its burning red reflections, so that the faceted points glittered like rubies, while the golden wine was shot with lines which looked like streaks of blood. It played on the sheeny surface of Ione's gown and dyed the shadows of the folds with crimson. It glanced on the edges of her hair and touched that too with its burning bright reflections, which mingled the suggestion of blood with the colour of gold. Everywhere was this suggestion of blood streaking the colour of gold—while the stimulating scents of the fruits and the intoxicating perfume of the hothouse flowers carried on the impressions of to-day within the tents, and threw back the memory to Palermo. Everywhere was this strange contradiction and commingling of strife and love, of poverty and riches, of the present and the past—

and the advancing shadow of the future like dread footsteps stealing nearer and nearer to the door.

Sitting there with the look of a man in the thick of the fight, hardly pressed, but holding his own and resolute to do his best, Armine thought how he should open the discussion which had to come. It was a pity that there should be one as the *coda* to this lighter theme; but it was due to his own dignity, to his repute, to their standing in the world, to the possibility of mutual esteem at home. She was young, ignorant, wilful, extreme; he had been warned to keep her in due subjection; and he was in his right as her husband to control her. This question of Edward Formby must be put on a practicable footing. As things were, it was essentially impossible.

‘I must have some talk with you, Ione,’ said Armine, speaking slowly, as he turned his chair sideways to the table, facing the fire and sitting in a kind of three-quarter way to her—neither in profile nor full front.

‘It is pleasant to hear your voice. You have been so long silent,’ said Ione in return, as if nothing were between them save the ordinary matters of life, and as though the conversation that was to come would touch no deeper theme than the flower-show of to-day or the visits of to-morrow.

‘You must tell me what you mean,’ he continued, still not looking at her. ‘Things have come to a pass where they cannot continue, and you have compelled me to take matters into my own hands.’

‘Yes?’ she said. ‘What matters? The housekeeping? You are quite welcome, Armine! I make a wretched manager, I know, but I cannot do better. The servants are so bad. But you have had a nice dinner to-day, have you not?’

‘It is not the housekeeping,’ he said. ‘It is something much more important.’

‘Yes?’ she repeated. ‘By-the-by,’ she added rapidly, as if to prevent his return, ‘how is Miss Barrington’s ankle? Was it sprained?’

‘Yes,’ said Armine curtly.

‘Badly?’

‘Quite bad enough.’

‘That faint was real?’ she asked, with well-acted interest.

‘What else should it have been?’ he answered a little contemptuously.

‘Oh, it might have been put on,’ said Ione quite amiably as to manner, but those narrowed lids, those dilated palpitating nostrils, and the cruel working of the curves about her lips! ‘Girls do those things sometimes, especially when they like the man who will take them in his arms and hold them close to his heart—close—close—as you did Miss Barrington to-day. For a

saint, as you all say she is, I must say this Monica of yours is wonderfully fond of another woman's husband!' she added with an insulting laugh.

'Because you think this, did you behave as you did to-day with Mr. Formby?' asked Armine.

'I behave! How did I behave?' was her defiant reply.

'I scarcely like to characterise your conduct, Ione. Disgracefully is the only word that I can find,' he answered.

'If I did act disgracefully, Armine, then I was only like yourself,' she said. 'You were disgraceful, if you like; but I was not!'

'What then would you call your extraordinary behaviour to Mr. Formby, and still more extraordinary insolence to Miss Barrington and myself?' he returned angrily.

'You and she tied in one string together—how pretty!' said Ione with a harsh laugh.

'Because you treated us both alike,' said her husband. 'You force me to connect myself with her because you forced me to be with her.'

'That shows my sweet disposition,' replied Ione, with again that harsh laugh and insolent disdain of manner. 'You had eyes only for her, so I thought you had better have as much of her as you liked. Only—caro mio—you have to pay for your festa. Do you understand, Armine? We all pay for our festas, and you have to do like the rest.'

'No, I do not understand,' answered Armine. 'I only know that you are utterly unreasonable and uncontrollable, in more ways than one.'

'Unreasonable! Good! Unreasonable in what, Armine?'

'In your jealousy, for one thing.'

'Jealousy of Monica Barrington, for instance?'

'Yes, of Monica Barrington,' he replied; and as he said this he turned to his wife full-face and looked at her straight between the eyes.

'That saint! That dear, delightful, charming saint! That serpent, you ought rather to say!' exclaimed Ione, passing from taunt to fury with the rapidity of lightning.

'I will not hear her spoken of disrespectfully,' said Armine sternly.

'Is she so sacred as this, she is not to be spoken of like any other person! You admire her so much as all that! You do admire her, Armine, do you not? You admire her excessively—freckles, washed-out eyes, and all?'

'Yes, I do admire her, and I esteem her as much as I like her,' said Armine. 'So should you, Ione, if you had either gratitude or common sense, for she has been your best friend here ever since you came. But I want to speak of Mr. Formby, not of Miss

Barrington,' he added. 'That is the subject between us at this moment.'

'And I want to speak of Miss Barrington,' retorted Ione. 'Miss Barrington, who is the cause of all the rest—Edward Formby and all. And I do not want her friendship, Armine. She is your friend, not mine.'

'If mine, she is yours,' he said.

'No, if she is yours she cannot be mine,' flashed out Ione. 'I will not have her friendship. She is a wicked woman—a bad, wicked wretch—and I will never let her enter my house again.'

'You need not be afraid. I should say she never would come here again,' said Armine.

'She shall not. It is my house, and I can say what women come to see me or not. And she shall not—never, never! I will never shake hands with her again; and next Sunday at church I will tell her before all the world what I think of her, and what a wicked, abandoned, shameless creature she is!'

Her passion rose as she went on, growing with that terrible strength of self-feeding and self-consuming jealousy.

'You are mad,' said Armine contemptuously.

'Because I do not love your mistress and will not receive her like my sister?' she said.

He turned from her with a shudder. His sole feeling for her at this moment was one of unutterable abhorrence, of loathing, of contempt.

'Your mistress,' repeated Ione. 'You know she is, Armine. You know you love her,' she said, bending forward her supple body in its gold-coloured dress—that supple body a little rounder than of old, a little changed in line and contour, but still lithe and soft and supple and flexible. As she spoke she laid her cheek on her hand, assuming a listening attitude—curved, beautiful, mocking, demoniacal. 'Tell me the truth, caro mio,' she went on to say. 'You love her, do you not?'

'Love her?' cried Armine, but his voice had in it an accent of despair rather than of deprecation.

The glittering line between those narrowed lids shone with more and more evil lustre; the curved body, soft and flexible, suggested more and more closely the idea of a snake preparing to strike—or it might be some tawny soft-footed lioness preparing to spring.

'Yes, tell me the truth, caro mio,' she repeated. 'You love this English miss—this pale-faced saint who is the mistress of another woman's husband—my devoted friend who has stolen from me all I had in the world—the heart of the man I loved. You hear, Armine? I say loved. There is a difference, you know. I cannot say love, because I do not love you any longer.'

I did, but I do not now. I will not share my husband with Miss Barrington. I prefer to keep my own things to myself.'

She stopped, still looking at her husband, who looked into the fire and kept silence.

'You love her, dear, do you not?' then said Ione after a short pause. 'You find her beautiful and charming, infinitely more beautiful than I am? Infinitely more charming altogether? She would have made you such a nice wife, Armine. Why did you not marry her, dear? Why did you come to Palermo and choose me?—I who am so immeasurably her inferior! You do love her Armine, do you not?—this nice, kind, beautiful Miss Barrington—this pale-faced saint of Oakhurst?'

'Yes,' said Armine, turning suddenly round and looking full into Ione's face. 'I did love her, Ione. She is the one perfect woman in the world for me, and the one for whose esteem and friendship I care the most.'

'Then you lied to me in the garden that day at Palermo?' said Ione. 'Faithless to her—a liar to me—you give yourself a good character, Armine!'

'Let the past alone,' he said. 'I did love her once; but I am none the less your faithful husband—none the less desirous to be your friend and protector, and to make your life as happy as I can.'

'You love her?' said Ione slowly, keeping exactly the same attitude and expression.

'I loved her,' he repeated.

'To my face, Armine, you say this? You dare to confess it?' she said.

'Yes, to your face,' he replied steadily. 'Why should I not?'

She opened her eyes to the fullest. They were like two living orbs of fire, blazing as the fire in the grate blazed and burnt. She sprang to her feet and raised both her hands high in the air. There was a crash, a cry, a heavy fall—and then she was kneeling by the hearth, her husband's lifeless body lying prone across her lap. All around lay the glittering fragments of broken glass, and the firelight shone on them as they strewed the floor like infernal gems. The red blood flowed redder as it streamed over her dress. Bosom and sleeves and skirt were dyed with her husband's life-blood; and the marred beauty of the man she loved was the last expression of her love.

With a kind of stupor for the present and a vivid return on the past, she remembered the stain on the yellow feathers of the bird, as she took up a fold of her gown and saw the red blood shot across the gold. She had killed her bird for jealousy, and now she had killed her husband; but it was in her right that both should belong to her, and her only; and had not the one deserted and the other betrayed her?



Ah! but that red spot staining the shining feathers of the golden bird, and that marred beauty of the man she loved—that lifeless body lying heavily across her lap!

The servant, who had heard the noise, came hurrying in, and her shrieks called in the neighbours. Soon the house was filled with the curious, whispering, horror-stricken crowd gathering round the doorway and looking at the awful scene, terrified and aghast. The murdered man across the lap of the kneeling woman—the lifeless head pressed against her bosom—the red blood over her dress and the firelight flashing over all:—it was a kind of infernal Pietà, where crime stood for sacrifice and the anguish of remorse for the agony of love.

Among the rest came Vincenzo, his black eyes glowing, his thick lips apart, his swarthy face transformed from its usual careless good-humour to the cruel triumph of a hunter who has at last come up with his prey.

‘Can I help you, my life, my love?’ he said in Sicilian, bending over Ione and touching her head with his hand.

She pushed back the hair from her forehead—there where he had touched her; and a red streak was left across the golden curls.

‘No,’ she said, with the quietness of despair; ‘I do not want you now. I have revenged myself.’

But now there came a dull kind of movement and a subdued murmur among the crowd, as the policeman, who had been summoned, elbowed his way through the throng and came up to the murdered man and his murderess. It was the end of all the passionate exaltation which had seemed to make this murder natural and right, and the beginning of the vulgar retribution which made it shameful and abominable. It was the end of romance and the beginning of reality—the hand of the law grasping the shoulder of the criminal who had thought herself a victim rightly avenged by a heroine. This man, and the shuddering breath of the crowd, represented the degradation of her crime. How different from the admiring looks of the men when she had carried her dead bird in her hand at her father’s mill!—or even from Vincenzo, now, when he bent over her and touched her head and called her his love and his life, while his hot breath on her forehead seemed like the kiss of some demon straight from the hell—where she was going. Going? Where she was at this moment!

But there was no help for it. She had committed a crime, and she must suffer for it: and the pitiless justice of the law knew no ruth because of her provocation, because of her passion, nor yet because of her beauty, her youth, nor her love.

Edward Formby was sitting in the library at Hillside. He was dreaming of Ione and of to-morrow—of the terrible step he

was about to take; of all it involved; of all to which it committed him both for loss and gain. Name, repute, social position, his own honour, his friends, the consciousness of evil example, the stain for ever on his conscience—these were for loss. For gain—he would have Ione. He loved her as he had never loved before and should never love again. And Armine was not worthy of her. Repute and honour would be lost, truly, but love and happiness would remain. She would forfeit what the world calls her claim to respect, but he would surround her with such careful devotion, such chivalrous regard, she should never feel that she had lost but only that she had gained. He would devote his whole life to her, and think the price paid for his treasure small in relation to its worth. What so imperative as love? What so holy?

All the same, it had an ugly sound, that phrase which crystallised the coming fact, running away with another man's wife. Monica and Anthony, and dear mild gentle Mrs. Barrington—all like his own family for length of loving friendship—they would not speak to him. Mrs. Anthony would fling her poisoned assegais at him and her. The very tradespeople and peasants would despise him—the magistrate and dispenser of justice who had transgressed the law and lowered himself beyond their level. The county would reject him, and in the hunting-field he would be publicly shunned. And for all this he would care comparatively nothing if, when he came home, he found Ione at his fireside—when all the legal preliminaries should be completed—his own, his wife.

St. Claire had been his friend, yes; that was true. He had offered him his help in times past, because he pitied him as a robust well-found gentleman might justly pity a poor devil who had neither health nor money. But pity is not equality; and those whom we compassionate are never shoulder to shoulder with ourselves. Lately he had helped him because Ione suffered from the lack into which her husband had brought her. But a man who is helped by another man for the sake of his wife, stands on a still lower plane than when he was helped for himself alone. And, in accepting that loan, Armine had yielded his position. Whether or not, the die was cast now, and Edward Formby had pledged himself and could not draw back even if he would; and he would not if he could.

Thinking all this—feverish, restless, tormented, unsatisfied; his eyes following the light rings and wreaths of smoke as they eddied round his head for a few seconds, then dispersed for ever into space; his heart filled only with Ione, her beauty, his own imperious passion, the consciousness of infinite dishonour, and the feeling of the gambler prepared to stake his all on that one throw—thinking all this and planning for to-morrow, the servant with a pale face and scared manner came hurriedly into the room.

And behind him walked the country constable, almost as scared as he, leading by the arm Ione, red-handed; her dress dyed with blood; her dead-white face and red-gold hair both touched with blood; brought before him, the nearest magistrate—the man whose life-long love she had agreed to be to-morrow—charged with the murder of her husband Armine.

## CHAPTER XXXVI.

## INTO THE DEPTHS.

YEARS passed, and the awful crime of which Oakhurst had been the theatre had passed somewhat into the legendary stage. People of course still remembered Ione and all the facts of the case, and still discussed her and her poor husband with the acrimony of partisans. Some held her to have been a monster pure and simple, without excuse or extenuation to be found for her wickedness, search as you would; and others thought that, well, there had been some kind of provocation somewhere, and others were mixed up rather more intimately than was desirable. Not much came out at the trial, but something did—enough to make people think there was more behind, and to obtain for Ione a comparatively lenient sentence.

A certain nameless cloud passed over Monica's repute, inasmuch as it came out that Ione had been jealous of her. No one said that his jealousy was well-founded. No one even went so far as to say that Dr. St. Claire had dared to raise his eyes so high as Monica Barrington's fair face. Still less did anyone suppose that she had stooped hers so low as to look at him. All the same, Ione had been jealous; and English society is intolerant of those unmarried interlopers who, however innocently, however unintentionally, poach on a wife's preserves. And though no one could say precisely What, everyone hinted that Something had been; and though everyone knew that Monica Barrington was an angel, still, on one of her shining wings was a certain slender but undoubted black feather.

Edward Formby, too, came in for his share of blame. Those dreams which had traversed his brain and fevered his blood as he watched the light rays of smoke eddy and then disperse were never made public to living soul; but his conduct had been imprudent enough to set suspicion afoot, and Vincenzo, who hated him, did him what damage he could. A few, however, defended him through all these possibilities of unproven iniquity. And of these Rachel Major was the staunchest. She loved him as women of lower condition, shut in by the narrow circumstances of a small country town, do sometimes love the unattainable great man of

the place. It may be the squire or the curate, the captain of the neighbouring regiment, or haply the heir of the ducal house. Whatever it is, it is the old story of the moth and the star; for the most part without even the chance of scorched wings. No one ever knows of this love, and few suspect it. It has no hope; no tangibility; no root-work in fact nor possibility; nevertheless it is—it exists. It colours all the thoughts and shapes all the dreams, and, even though it does not mould the actual circumstances of life, it destroys all solid happiness. And loving him as she did, secretly and without hope—loving him as Pygmalion loved Galatea, before love made the marble human—or as maidens of old loved the god whom they desired as their own—Rachel defended Edward Formby with a faithfulness of advocacy which looked like neighbourly fidelity and Christian charity, and was in reality womanly love.

During the years of Ione's incarceration many changes took place at Oakhurst. Edward Formby was mostly away, travelling in remote places, and Hillside was practically untenanted. He had not married. A wife out in the wilds of Africa, or the untrodden forests of Madagascar, where he shot big game and ran hair-breadth risks of his life, would have been as much out of place as patent leather boots and my gentleman's gentleman to keep them bright. Nor was Monica married. And it seemed now as if neither of these two ever would find the fitting partner. They had been destined for each other by the fitness of things; and, flying in the face of Providence as they had done by frustrating its designs, they were rightly condemned to celibacy and joylessness, said those who thought any marriage better than none.

But Monica was not entirely unhappy for all the increased seclusion of her life, and the absence of outward gaiety. Two years after the murder she had brought home a little child—no one ever knew from where; and this seemed to have filled up the measure of her life and happiness. She had devoted herself to it as if she had been in very truth its mother, and people who had at first wondered had now left off speculating. But Anthony and Theodosia would never acknowledge this adoption, though they did not publicly oppose it. Still the world knew that they did not endorse it; and there were shrewd surmises why.

Vincenzo had disappeared. His shop had been put up for sale, and a respectable Englishman from the county town—the foreman of the large confectioner's there—had bought it as it stood, and re-transformed the whole thing to honest British uses. Those outlandish sweets disappeared, and good tough cakes and indigestible Bath-buns were to be found in their stead. Whereat all Oakhurst rejoiced, and gave itself periodical fits of patriotic dyspepsia in consequence.

Miss Maria Crosby was still the invalid par excellence of Oakhurst, and Miss Jane Wintergreen, as formerly, the consecrated constable of private morals; while poor Rachel was her aunt's only half-devoted slave—the other half being that of a protesting victim. But then Rachel Major was one of those who are predestined to sacrifice by the very circumstances of condition and nature; predestined to give care and not to receive back acknowledgment; to squander a love unseen on a man who neither knew nor could have returned had he known. It is not only organisms which prey on each other. Souls and affections follow the same law.

The time was now at hand when the term of Ione's imprisonment should be over. In a few days she would be free. Monica had kept the date ever before her eyes, for the great fear connected with it, as also for her determination still to befriend, if she could, the woman whom Armine St. Claire had married. She had always resolved that she would go and meet her at the prison gates and be the first to receive her back to life and liberty, and, she hoped and believed, to repentance and the better way; and to bring her home to the Dower House—and her child. Criminal as she was, whose hands had been dyed with her husband's blood, she was the mother of his child; she had been his wife; and she could not be discarded. The pity which Christ had shown to sinners might well be repeated by man for his brother; and Monica would be the friend of the passionate and miserable Ione—her friend to the last.

But the fates undid her web of plans and hopes. On the day when Ione was to be released, Mrs. Barrington lay dying, and Monica's place was by her mother's death-bed, not before Ione's prison-gates. Still, even in the midst of all this anguish at the Dower House, she had remembered Armine's wife, and had written making arrangements for her safe convoy here.

As Ione came out into the open air she met Vincenzo standing to meet her. Faithful to the end he had come from Sicily to receive her. Where all the rest had deserted her, as it seemed, he stood firm in his love, without failure and without flaw. He was the black thread in her life, woven into its very substance by the sin of her mother; the fate laid on her by the necessity of circumstances; her scourge and her punishment. But he loved her; he was faithful to her; where the whole world held aloof he came to receive her; and the crime which had dishonoured her with all others, had not discredited her with him.

'Now you are mine,' he said as he seized her by her hands, and drew her towards him, kissing her on her lips in the full light of day. 'This is the day for which I have lived and waited, Ione, my love! my life! Now you belong to me, and I am your saviour! I, the poor Vincenzo, your father's servant, the only



faithful love among all these great lords who pretended to adore you.'

'No,' said Ione; 'I will not go with you. I will go to Monica Barrington. I want my child.'

'You shall have your child,' said Vincenzo. 'We will go to the Dower House together. Come with me. We will go.'

A carriage was standing there waiting on his orders. He spoke to the man in a low voice, then put Ione in, leaping in after her like a bloodhound when the quarry is at last run down. The man struck his horses, and they set off at a smart pace through the streets, down to the docks, where a vessel lay ready to start for the Mediterranean, to the captain of which, his compatriot, Vincenzo had confided so much of the story as might be necessary to explain why this new passenger should be recalcitrant.

And when Monica's messenger returned to the Dower House, all that he could say was that the foreigner who had once owned Thornton's shop in High Street had taken Mrs. St. Claire in his own carriage to bring her here to Oakhurst.

But they never came, and by no search were they able to be found.

Not to be found, in good truth! Did anyone ever look for them in that remote village on the sunny slopes of Etna, where Vincenzo brought to his lonely farm that beautiful half-foreign woman with her red-gold hair and strange wild eyes and wilder ways—like a bird ever beating her wings in vain, in vain, against an imprisonment worse and more hopeless than that English one had been? Entrapped; confined in space; the farm her doorless dungeon; the olive gardens and the vineyards her roofless cells; unable to escape; mafiosi all around her—voluntary gaolers who brought her back when she tried to flee, and who would have stabbed her rather than she should ever be free; treated as mad when she made her moan, and all chance of a hearing denied her; degraded by Vincenzo's love; revolted by his coarseness; insulted by his jealousy; maddened by his tyranny—she dragged out her weary life of expiation by suffering. No frantic prayer could make her husband give her news of her child.

'It is Monica Barrington's, it is not yours,' he would say. 'Be content with mine.'

But his were not Armine's; and the bitterness of her motherhood was the worst of her many tortures. She had passed into the darkness of her fate—dark under the glowing sunlight, dreary for all the fragrance of the orange-blossoms, the crimson glory of the pomegranates, the splendour of the skies, the beauty of the seas. The sunlight gave her no joy, the moonlight no peace. She was blotted out from the world, living and yet dead; a mother who could never see her child; a lover who had killed her beloved; the lady-wife of a man who had reduced her to the condition of a

peasant, and who kept her as a slave whom he tortured even while he caressed; the reluctant mother of children abhorrent to her, because she abhorred him who gave them to her; a woman with the fatal gift of constancy, whose soul was never faithless to the past, and whose body was like a jewel pawned and pledged without her will—and impossible to redeem!

But she lived. She lived by the strength of the fierce desire and jealous hope that she might one day take Armine's child to her heart and detach her from Monica—that she might say: 'I am your mother and you are my dead love's second life. Come to me, and leave her for whom he was slain. Love me who loved him and hate her who wronged me and caused his death.' But that hope was false, that desire for ever unappeased. She lived on and on, in burning flames of jealousy and wrath and hate and yearning for revenge; and the day never came when she was free nor when she looked into the face of Armine's fair daughter, whom Monica Barrington had made her own.

THE END.









[September, 1889.]



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